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Teacher Commitment in an Academically Improving, High-Poverty Public School

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Teacher Commitment in an Academically Improving, High-Poverty Public School

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to those dearest ones who gave me life—

my parents,

Margaret Norene (Hopper) Mutchler and Calvin Kendal Mutchler;

and to those who give my life even deeper meaning—

my husband and children,

Dennis Kimble Brown,

Margaret Grace Mutchler-Brown, and

Jacob Kimble Mutchler-Brown.

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Teacher Commitment in an Academically Improving, High-Poverty Public School

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The relationships among teacher quality, teacher turnover, and school success of students of poverty are critical and complex. Patterns of teacher migration and attrition within urban districts often result in an inequitable share of experienced, committed teachers for high-poverty public schools. To reverse these patterns, we need to learn more about the two faces of teacher commitment: commitment to the teaching profession itself and commitment to a specific school organization.

At the heart of this dissertation research is the assumption that teacher turnover in high-poverty schools is due, largely, to mismanagement of the existing teacher workforce—not insufficient teacher supply or rising demand. The study set out to better understand the dynamics of teacher commitment, particularly as it relates to the organizational characteristics of high-poverty schools. To achieve this goal, the study answers two questions: (1) What does "commitment" mean to teachers who work in

schools serving students of poverty? and (2) What factors appear to affect teachers' commitment to a high-poverty school?

The phenomenon was explored in a qualitative interview study of seventeen teachers, identified by school colleagues as "committed" to teaching students of poverty, who presently or formerly worked in the same high-poverty elementary school in a central Texas urban district. Data were analyzed from a constructivist orientation, using a mix of inductive and interpretive methods. Results indicate that factors influencing teachers' professional commitment center on their culturally- and/or ideologically-based dedication to making a difference for students, and on their willingness to devote personal time and energy outside their classrooms to take action on that commitment. Factors most important to teachers' organizational commitment are grounded in the quality of their relationships with fellow teachers and other school employees, specifically the extent to which teachers enjoy mutual support in managing the work of teaching, and experience respectful relationships in the workplace. Finally, three major issues, each linked to study participants' experiences specific to teaching in a high-poverty school, are further interpreted and implications are proposed for action by school administrators, policy change by education decision-makers, and/or new inquiry by researchers.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

BACKGROUND AND SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

The problem of teacher retention in high-poverty schools is receiving increasing attention from researchers and policymakers who are aware of the changing dynamics of the teacher workforce in the U.S. (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2001; Kirby, Naftel, & Berends, 1999; Liu, Kardos, Kauffman, Peske, & Johnson, 2000). Analysis of teacher turnover has shifted from viewing the issue as a changing balance in supply and demand to viewing it as a problem of resource mismanagement (Ingersoll, 2001, 2002; Prince, 2002).

High-poverty schools are disproportionately caught in what Ingersoll (2001) calls "the revolving door of pre-retirement turnover." High-poverty schools in general have higher rates of teacher turnover than do more affluent schools (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). Patterns of teacher transfer among schools within urban districts, in particular, are associated with student academic, racial, and economic characteristics (Hanushek et al., 2001; Prince, 2002); In addition, schools with higher proportions of students from non-White and/or economically disadvantaged families tend to be staffed by teachers with less professional teaching experience (Hanushek et al., 2001; Prince, 2002; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory [SEDL], 2000).

In today's environment of high expectations for student academic performance and high-stakes state accountability systems, a mobile and inequitable share of experienced teachers carries serious consequences for all schools serving students of poverty. First, teacher quality has significant, direct, and cumulative consequences for the school success of students, as measured by academic achievement and student persistence in school toward earning a high school diploma. There exists a positive relationship

between the school success of students and teacher quality that is stronger than the relationship between student achievement and either the background of the student (socioeconomic status, language, race, ethnicity) or such other school factors as class size or school spending (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Fetler, 1997; Haycock, 2000; Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Wayne & Youngs, 2001).

A second argument extends the first to the organizational level: teacher turnover often diminishes the overall productivity of the school organization, at least through its effects on the organizational culture. Research suggests "[while] too little turnover of employees is tied to stagnancy in organizations … high levels of employee turnover are found to be both cause and effect of problematic conditions and low performance" (Ingersoll, 2001, pp. 504-505). In the present high-stakes school accountability environment, barriers to the ability of teachers and building administrators to facilitate educational success on a school-wide and district-wide scale have serious political as well as educational implications. Inequity in the distribution of experienced teachers among schools in a district may have direct influence on the ability of the district's high-poverty schools to attain statewide goals for student performance and school improvement. Indeed, the very same schools that suffered from resource constraints prior to passage of school finance reform laws across the nation in the 1990s may continue to suffer from an inequitable share of the greatest resource of all: teacher quality.

PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

It is clear that patterns of teacher migration and attrition within urban districts often result in an inequitable share of experienced, committed teachers for high-poverty public schools. To reverse these patterns, we need to learn more about the experienced, committed teachers who stay in these schools. The purpose of this study was, simply put,

to explore the two faces of teacher commitment in high-poverty schools: commitment to the teaching profession itself and commitment to a specific school organization.

Given the complex and critical relationships among school success of students of poverty, teacher quality, and teacher turnover, it is important for district policymakers and school administrators to be able to offset the factors that influence committed, experienced teachers to leave high poverty schools. Ultimately, school and district leaders need to know what factors encourage and support teachers to stay in such schools—many of which present unique challenges to teacher work compared to schools that serve middle and low-poverty schools (Berryhill, 2002; Lankford et al., 2002; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1997).

Considerable research exists on teacher turnover, teacher satisfaction, and other aspects of teacher labor force behavior. Even more research is available on the improvement of schools that serve students from traditionally under-performing economic and social population groups. Less common is research at the intersection of these two areas. Indeed, although there is much empirical knowledge on why teachers leave schools of poverty, little is available on why they stay.

As a qualitative interview study of the phenomenon teacher commitment, the current research attempts to capture and interpret the articulated experiences of teachers who presently or once worked in the same high-poverty urban elementary school. An expected outcome of the research was, quite simply, a better understanding of teacher commitment and its role in teachers' employment decisions, with a particular emphasis on the interaction between teacher commitment and the organizational features of high-poverty schools.

Another expected outcome of the study was the identification of a set of previously unstudied variables important to understanding the commitment beliefs and

behaviors of teachers relative to working in a high-poverty school. These variables provide a potential basis for further research, and also point to implications of teacher commitment for policy and administrative action toward encouraging and supporting the retention of effective teachers in high-poverty schools.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

The research questions posed by this study are:

1. What does "commitment" mean to teachers who work in schools serving children of poverty?
2. What factors appear to affect teachers' commitment to working in high-poverty schools?

Answers to these questions were pursued in a qualitative interview study conducted from a constructivist orientation. This allowed me to approach the phenomenon of teacher commitment as an unexplored issue relatively unconstrained by predetermined categories of analysis and attempt to uncover the meaning study participants use to "organize their experiences and make sense of their worlds" (Hatch, 2002, p. 94).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although the research questions lend themselves to taking a broader, ethnographic approach to building knowledge, the time intensity of such a study was beyond my reach. In choosing to implement an interview study, I attempted to maximize the strengths of personal, semi-structured interview methodology and minimize its weaknesses.

Limitations of the study at the stage of data collection are related to three characteristics of qualitative, open-ended interviews. First, the questions were interpreted

uniquely by each interviewee, who brings to the interview particular experiences and perspectives that filter her or his understanding of each question. Second, the interviews took place in a different context for each interviewee. Time, place, and events entirely unrelated to the interview carried meanings into the conversation that could not easily be perceived, much less recorded. Third, the interview interactions rarely achieved moments of shared meaning. Even my perception of "complete" understanding of a teacher's comments and her/his acknowledgement of my understanding could not be taken as verification of common understanding.

Limitations of the study at the stage of data analysis are due to two more characteristics of the methodology. First, transcriptions of recorded interviews were rarely complete. Not only were initial greetings and parting interactions literally unrecorded, myriad communications during the interviews were not represented in tape recordings or typed transcripts. Specifically, all non-verbal events were lost. Finally, analysis of data is, by definition, the construction of meaning. As such, my informal and formal analyses of teacher data served to, once more, alter the data through re-interpretation.

A final limitation to the current research resides in the breadth of data collected through the chosen methodology. Qualitative data from a small sample of teachers who presently or formerly worked at a particular school in a single district cannot be generalized to other teachers in other schools and other districts. Analysis of these data can, however, lead to the development of well-grounded "particularizations" (Patton, 1990), which take into consideration the time- and place-bound nature of human behavior. At minimum, particularizations represent working hypotheses for future inquiry.

ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

This report consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 has outlined the background and scope of the problem of teacher turnover in high-poverty schools and described the purpose and significance of this study of teacher commitment. This chapter also defines the research questions, provides a brief overview of the methodological approach to data collection and analysis, and informs readers of certain limitations of the study.

Chapter 2 delves into three different bodies of education and organizational literature, to attempt to illustrate the complexity of what appear to be very simple questions of teacher motivation and behavior. The socio-political, individual, and organizational context for teaching and learning in schools of poverty is elaborated, and both classic and contemporary literature relevant to teacher commitment is highlighted.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach and research design for the study. Details are provided to attempt to clarify the constructivist orientation of this research and to give readers confidence in the dependability of the design and credibility of results obtainable from the interview study. Data collection and analysis procedures are thoroughly explained in the remainder of the chapter.

Chapter 4 presents a narrative of the research results in such a way as to bring the reader, as much as possible, into the experiences of teachers at Old Town Elementary School[1]—while clearly answering the two research questions at the heart of this dissertation research.

A primary finding of the study is that teachers' relationships with students and parents appear to be at the center of their professional commitment to teaching children of poverty, while their relationships with teaching colleagues and school administrators seem to be the most influential factor in teachers' willingness to remain committed to a

[1] A pseudonym, intended to disguise the identity of the school that served as the site for this study.

specific school organization. Chapter 5 considers the meaning of this and other key research findings and suggests implications of the study for administrative practice in schools and districts, education policy, and future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

INTRODUCTION

The importance of the problem investigated in this research resides in its context, which is largely defined by the sociopolitical factors surrounding the education of children of poverty and the nature of teacher labor force trends. This chapter reviews literature relevant to both of these areas, to communicate the immediacy of the problem for attention from policymakers, administrators, and researchers.

A third area of knowledge is then examined and summarized to bring current understandings about teacher commitment to bear on the teacher resource problem in high-poverty schools. Literature at the intersection of education and management research provides empirically-based definitions of employee commitment and various explanations for how teachers, as members of organizations, gain and lose commitment.

THE CONTEXT FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING IN SCHOOLS OF POVERTY

Equity and Excellence

Equity and excellence are two core values long associated with public schooling in the United States. Although they are inevitably in competition with other values people hold dear, these two have most often been at the heart of debates on public education access and resources (Fowler, 2000; Stout, Tallerico, and Scribner, 1995).

Education historians describe an ebb and flow of school reform focused on *equity* in this century as occurring in cycles throughout the 20th century (Cuban, 1990). The most recent press for education equity in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in the integration of schools, policy attention to children with disabilities, and programmatic initiatives in support of equal rights to a public education (Fowler, 2000; Spring, 2001).

Specific to children of poverty, the Head Start program for poor preschool-age children, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and the Job Corps for training and employing youth were all initiated during the 1960s. Among these, Title I of the ESEA has been called the major educational strategy of the War on Poverty waged by the Lyndon Baines Johnson's administration (Spring, 2001). The passage of Title I was driven by the same purpose as many other federally-initiated social programs during the era: to bring groups of Americans historically excluded from prosperity into mainstream society through education, training, and access to job opportunities. Title I, which focuses explicitly on programs for "educationally deprived children," emphasized the importance of poor and minority children as economic resources for the nation, and asserted the belief that targeted education programs would prepare the children of the poor to leave the culture of poverty and successfully enter the middle class.

These federal initiatives adopted into policy some fundamental and long-standing beliefs in the U.S. about the relationship between education and individual poverty. They attempted to address the problems of what Tyack (1974) called the "occupational caste system" by targeting persistent barriers in the nation to educational equality and quality for poor and non-White citizens. In the earlier decade, the U.S. Supreme Court had articulated in its decision in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case a definition of schooling as "a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment" (Tyack, 1974, p. 279). The ESEA, and Title I specifically, extended this belief in the power of education to break the cycle of poverty by creating and funding categorical programs that, to this day, continue to reach children in every school district in the nation.

A nation-wide shift in educational priorities to *excellence* occurred in the 1980's, when "the American public was inundated by a sense of school failure" (Coombs and Wycoff, 1994, p. 3) due to well-publicized reports of declining student achievement and negative comparisons of schools in the United States with those in other nations (Cuban, 1990; Fowler, 2000). An earlier national focus on the quality of public education had occurred in the late 1950s. After the Soviet Union launched Sputnik I, President Eisenhower argued for a system of standardized student testing to ensure the nation's schools were preparing children to compete with other industrialized nations (Spring 2001)—particularly in areas of knowledge and skill considered important to maintaining the economic and technological advantage in an expanding and more diverse international community. This time, *Nation at Risk*, a 1983 report issued during the Reagan administration, charged the public schools with failing students and American society in the face of increasing international competition with Japan and West Germany.

Reforms proposed by education leaders, the business community, and other interest groups were enacted primarily at the state level during the 1980s. Policies and programs effectively "shifted the focus of public education from equity to quality and emphasized themes of high standards, school choice, competition, devolution, and accountability" (Coombs and Wycoff, 1994, p. 1). Private sector interests and industries formed alliances with state governments, initiating school reforms that focused first on the need to ensure minimum competency among public school graduates (Goldberg and Traiman, 2001) and then to embrace the value of higher standards of student learning, for which schools and districts would be held publicly accountable.

Through the 1980s and into the 1990s, state legislatures created school accountability systems that set standards for high student performance and aligned state-mandated curriculum, instruction, and student assessment. Members of both political

parties spearheaded these efforts, at various times. In Texas, for example, education reform began with the Perot Commission, appointed under Democratic Governor Mark White. Democratic Governor Ann Richards signed the first major piece of state reform legislation, HB 72 (1984), requiring districts to publish annual "performance reports" based on student academic achievement as measured by standardized tests. Subsequently, President George W. Bush, a Republican, moved this legislation forward during his governorship of Texas to develop one of the first comprehensive, statewide public school accountability systems in the nation. During this same period, former President Bill Clinton, a Democrat, was leading major statewide education initiatives as the governor of Arkansas, many of which also focused on defining and implementing test-based measures of school and district accountability.

At the national level, the concept of excellence in public education made an important transition in the 1990s (Cohen, 2002; Public Broadcasting Station [PBS], 2002). Under the first George Bush presidency in the late 1980s, a National Education Summit—attended by leaders of industry and business as well as policy leaders (i.e., primarily state governors)—had produced a set of National Education Goals articulating a demand for higher education standards for all students. In 1993 and 1994, President Clinton helped put into place the first Goals 2000 legislation. Even more important to the education of children of poverty, the 1994 reauthorization of the ESEA provided specific guidance and incentives toward the nationwide implementation of standards-based education reform. Cohen asserts that, together, these two major policies (Goals 2000 and ESEA 1994):

> combined the federal government's historic role in providing aid to schools serving our nation's most disadvantaged students with a new effort to ensure that federal education programs and resources supported the implementation of state and local standards-based education reform" (2002, p, 1).

In 1996 and 1999, two more National Education Summits convened during the Clinton administration—organized and led largely by national business leaders (PBS, 2002), who extended their advocacy for education standards nationwide in the belief that "in the international marketplace … the United States is involved in a 'battle of the classrooms'" (Goldberg &Traiman, 2001, p. 75). In 2001, reauthorization of the ESEA in the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) not only retained the standards-based emphasis of 1994 but also restored an annual student testing requirement for all schools receiving Title I funds (Wenning, Herdman, & Smith, 2002, p. 38). With the passage of NCLB, Congress and the President left the bully pulpit behind by tying tangible school and district consequences to Title I student achievement gains.

The sociopolitical context surrounding teaching in schools of poverty might now be said to reflect a valuing of "*equity in excellence*." A merger of these two core values is seen in the now-widespread public accountability of teachers, schools, and districts to achieve excellence in education "for all children." Although all students, not just students of poverty, are included in both the rhetoric and reality of these public education reforms, schools rated as low-performing in many state accountability systems tend to be overwhelmingly peopled by children of poverty. As a result, the stakes are particularly high for these students, schools, and teachers.

Teacher Characteristics and Students of Poverty

As noted earlier, among other positive social outcomes, public education is viewed as essential to the future of children whose families live in low socio-economic conditions (Spring, 2001; Tyack, 1974). In order for children to successfully negotiate this path, they must succeed in the public schools; at a minimum, they must demonstrate a certain level of mastery over the established public school curriculum and earn high school diplomas.

Throughout the 1990s, specific equity-related issues tied to the goal of achieving school excellence for all children arose in such areas as school finance, school facilities, student access to technology, and learning accommodations for students with special needs. Barriers to equal access to public education in each of these areas were the target of federal and/or state legislation throughout the decade. Until very recently, however, attention to the issue of student access to experienced, skilled teachers was notably absent.

Title I of ESEA, under the NCLB Act of 2001, now mandates states take action to ensure the quality of all teachers of core academic subjects. Characteristics of a qualified teacher, in this case, are defined as (a) licensed by the state, (b) having an earned bachelor's degree, and (c) demonstrating tested competence in the subject area taught (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2002). The NCLB teacher quality provisions apply to all newly hired teachers as of school year 2002-03 and will apply to all other teachers in core academic areas by the end of school year 2005-06.

The relationship between teacher characteristics and student success has been confirmed by research for some time now, particularly in terms of two specific measures of student learning: achievement and persistence toward high school graduation. In investigating the first relationship, with student achievement, researchers have found that teacher characteristics have a direct and even cumulative effect on student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Sanders and Rivers, 1996). Findings include evidence that teachers have a stronger influence on student achievement than do student background factors, such as poverty, home language, and racial or ethnic minority status. Furthermore, over time, the impact of individual teacher quality on measurable student learning is compounded:

> Students who have several effective teachers in a row make dramatic gains in achievement, while those who have even two ineffective teachers in a row lose significant ground which they may never recover (Haycock, 2000, p. 3).

Examination of other school factors has confirmed the strength of the relationship between student achievement and teacher quality. A stronger correlation exists between student achievement and teacher characteristics than exists between achievement and any one of such factors as small class size, increased school spending, or increased teacher salary (Ingersoll, 2002; Prince 2002; Wayne & Youngs, 2001).

In considering the second relationship, between teacher characteristics and student persistence toward high school graduation, Fetler (1997) found evidence that high dropout rates are strongly associated both with student poverty and with higher percentages of teachers exhibiting poorer qualifications. In this case, lower teacher quality was defined as possessing only a Bachelors' degree and as having no prior teaching experience (i.e., being a new, first-time teacher).

Patterns of Teacher Distribution within Districts

It is evident that access to highly-skilled teachers is critical to student academic success in high poverty schools—perhaps even more so than in other public schools. Research points to an all-to-common school staffing pattern, however, that directly violates this need of students of poverty for experienced, skilled teachers. Economically poor, lower-achieving students disproportionately attend schools with less qualified teachers:

> More experienced teachers with seniority usually obtain more desirable classroom assignments with well behaved, higher achieving students. Novice teachers lacking seniority receive less desirable, more difficult classrooms with lower achieving, at-risk students (Fetler, 1997, p. 7).

Less advantaged students are more likely to have teachers with Bachelors degrees or less (Fetler, 1997; Lankford et al., 2002). Their classrooms are staffed more frequently

by teachers who lack full certification or certification appropriate to their teaching assignment (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Ingersoll, 2002; Lankford et al., 2002; Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, 2002).

In addition, schools that are low performing and/or serve a high proportion of ethnic-minority students are likely to have a higher proportion of first-year teachers (Fetler, 1997; Lankford et al., 2002; SEDL, 2000). This is in spite of the widely accepted understanding that "new teachers, even those with good pre-service preparation, are still learning to teach" (Feiman-Nemser, Carver, Schwille, and Yusko, 1999).

An analysis of administrative data in Texas revealed a pattern of marked inequity in the allocation of experienced teachers among schools within the three school districts studied (SEDL, 2000). Using student ethnicity and student achievement as criteria to differentiate among schools in each district, researchers found a proportionally higher percentage of beginning (first year) teachers and novice teachers (1-5 years experience) assigned to schools of high diversity (defined as enrolling a non-White student population of 55% or more). The pattern persisted when schools were viewed according to student and school performance. In a comparison of teacher placement among high and low achieving schools in the three districts, one district had nearly three times as many beginning teachers in its low achieving schools as in its high achieving schools. The second district had significantly more novice as well as beginning teachers in its low achieving schools. Only the third district showed an equal distribution of teachers by experience among its schools.

Consequences for the Work of Teachers

Since the mid-1800's, the teaching profession has responded to shifting public values associated with education (Cuban, 1990). When economic or social factors bring heightened attention to the public schools, attention to the knowledge, skills, and

activities of teachers seems to quickly follow. For example, when the Cold War environment of the 1950's raised national concerns regarding American students' ability to compete internationally, public school teachers were charged with improving the preparation of students in mathematics and the sciences.

In the 1980's, concerns for the role of teachers re-emerged when the United States again experienced the pressures of international comparisons. In Texas, H. Ross Perot declared teachers to be "part of the problem" (Fowler, 2000). This time, the focus on teachers brought into question their own levels of knowledge and skill as professional educators. In the early years of the post-A Nation at Risk excellence movement, states instituted basic skills testing of teachers and developed statewide teacher appraisal systems to create permanent systems for measuring teacher quality. The status of and respect for the teaching profession in the eyes of policymakers and the public sharply declined.

Since states began in the 1990s to collect more comprehensive data to measure and compare student performance, extreme variability among student groups, schools, and districts has been revealed. The diversity of student and community needs is well-documented by districts that have created programs to support low-performing schools; some schools need supports for parents, others need access to technology and other materials, and still others need targeted student programs (Reyes, Scribner, & Paredes Scribner, 1999). As the occasional high-poverty school has undergone radical transformation, its success story points to (among other things) the critical role that teachers play in shaping and implementing school reforms that "work" (Scheurich, 1998; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000). For example, in their study of eight, high-performing south Texas schools that serve predominantly low-income, Hispanic student populations, Reyes et al. identified a set of conditions exhibited across all the schools. One of the

conditions centered explicitly on providing faculty and staff: (a) freedom and support for curricular and instructional innovation; (b) empowerment to participate in site-based decision-making; (c) support to “reach their potential” [i.e., personal and professional development opportunities] and (d) a collegial, collaborative work environment.

The renewed acknowledgement of teachers as resources essential to the success of education reform makes it imperative that schools most in need of improvement have access to the best available teacher resources. An examination of teacher turnover, however, reveals that schools of poverty, more often than not, experience the loss rather than gain of these precious resources.

Teacher Turnover in High-Poverty Schools

In contrast to new pressures for skilled, experienced teachers in high-poverty schools stands the reality of teacher labor force behavior. The changing dynamics of teacher supply and demand pose an increasingly complex set of challenges to the access of students of poverty to high quality teacher resources.

Until recently, the assumption has been that many of our nation’s schools are suffering from a teacher shortage due to rising student enrollments and declining numbers of newly prepared teachers to replace those who are retiring (Kirby et al., 1999). This assumption is now being countered, however, with the claim that the overall supply of certified teachers is more than ample in most states and districts (Ingersoll, 2001, 2002). Even in California, a state with perhaps the highest demand for teachers in sheer numbers, it is estimated that "there are enough credentialed teachers in the state to fill every teaching vacancy four times over" (Prince, 2002, p. 13).

It is true that individuals with certain specializations, such as special education and secondary level mathematics and science, are in higher demand than are other teachers. And there is no doubt that the rate of teacher turnover can sometimes vary

widely among school districts. Increasingly, though, this teacher workforce problem is being characterized not as insufficient teacher supply or rising teacher demand but rather a mismanaged teacher pool (Ingersoll, 2001, 2002; Prince, 2002). Ingersoll (2001) describes a "revolving door" phenomenon that has developed in the teacher workforce in recent years. This trend is characterized by two major types of what he calls "pre-retirement turnover": teacher transfer to positions in other schools (referred to as migration) and teacher exit from the profession entirely (referred to as attrition).

Teacher Migration and Teacher Attrition

The first type of turnover, migration, is often overlooked because it doesn't represent an absolute loss of teachers from the workforce. The effect of ongoing teacher transfers on a school district, however, is to create a perpetual need to fill classroom vacancies. Some estimates place teacher migration at 50% of all teacher turnover (Prince, 2002), which means large numbers of teachers are staying in the profession but are leaving their assigned schools for other schools—often in the same or a nearby school district. For example, over the five year period between 1993 and 1998, urban schools in large metropolitan areas of New York experienced a 20 to 30 percent turnover of teachers who moved to a different school in the same district. During the same period, 6 to 13 percent of teachers in these districts moved to a different school district in the state. Suburban teacher turnover within districts was not much better, ranging from 15 to 20 percent, while another 14 to 15 percent of teachers moved to other New York school districts (Lankford et al., 2002).

The second type of turnover, attrition, represents an immediate loss from the local teacher pool and, oftentimes, a permanent loss of educators willing to participate in the teacher workforce. On an annual basis, 14 percent of practicing public school teachers leave the Texas public system (Hanushek et al., 2001). In New York, 30 percent of

teachers hired in 1993 were no longer teaching in the state in 1998 (Lankford et al., 2002). Nationally, one in five new teachers leave the profession by their third year of teaching (Johnson & Birkeland, 2002). Teachers who leave the field do so for a variety of reasons and there is evidence some return at a later point in their careers (Ingersoll, 2001). The short-term effect of attrition, however, is that of absolute reduction in teachers available in the district.

Impacts on High-poverty Schools

Examination of the patterns of teacher turnover indicates a disproportionate number of schools caught in the "revolving door of pre-retirement turnover" enroll large numbers of students of poverty, many of whom also are from ethnic or racial minority backgrounds (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Hanushek et al., 2001; Ingersoll, 2001; Prince, 2002). In addition, many of the students in these schools are performing at low levels of achievement (Lankford et al., 2002).

High-poverty schools have higher rates of teacher turnover than do more affluent schools (Hanushek et al., 2001; Ingersoll, 2001, 2002; Prince, 2002). As example, between 1996 and 1999, Philadelphia schools experienced a turnover of 33 percent of its teachers—nearly half of whom migrated within the district. Among migrating teachers, many moved to schools with "higher test scores, lower poverty rates, and fewer minority students" (Prince, 2002, p. 12). In the state of New York, a recent comprehensive study of teacher distribution not only showed higher teacher turnover rates in poor urban schools, but revealed that the teachers who left were more likely to have higher levels of teaching skill than those who stayed. The researchers speculated, "More qualified teachers seize opportunities to leave difficult working conditions and move to more appealing environments" (Lankford et al., 2002, p. 55).

This pattern of teacher labor force behavior creates disparities between higher and lower wealth schools not only in the number and persistence of teacher vacancies, but also on the choices schools have among teacher candidates for those vacancies. Prince (2002), reporting on a study by an advocacy group in New York City, stated an Upper West Side Manhattan middle school enjoyed a relative wealth of teacher applicants (58) compared to the five applicants received by a Harlem middle school. Extreme differences in average numbers of applicants per teacher vacancy also were documented in a recent study of high and low turnover schools (Guin, 2004). The former group of schools typically had applicant pools of 5 or less individuals, while the latter had over 150 candidates.

Similar patterns of teacher migration were found in the Texas public schools, where research for the current study is based:

> Schools serving large numbers of academically disadvantaged, black or Hispanic students tend to lose a substantial fraction of teachers each year both to other districts and out of the Texas public schools entirely (Hanushek et al., 2001).

Annually, the overall within-district migration rate in Texas is seven percent, with four percent changing schools within the district and three percent transferring to other districts. Patterns of inter-district migration revealed teachers are moving to higher achieving districts that enroll lower percentages of low-income and minority students. This pattern is repeated in the migration of teachers *within* urban school districts: teachers who transfer from one school to another within the same district are leaving schools with higher proportions of students who are academically and economically disadvantaged for schools with lower percentages of low-income and minority students. Overall, Hanushek et al. (2001) report “the most dramatic differences in school transition rates are related to student achievement” (p. 15).

An earlier Texas study found a clear relationship between teacher turnover, teacher experience, and student characteristics in some districts. Early career teachers (those with 0-5 year's experience) in two of the three school districts studied were disproportionately assigned to schools serving high numbers of non-White, economically disadvantaged, and low achieving students. Data from the study indicated teachers in this novice group also had a high level of turnover: one-fourth to one-third of early-career teachers left the districts between school years 1998-99 and 1999-00. At the campus level, teacher mobility was even higher for the most inexperienced members of this group; first year teachers left their assigned schools at a rate of 30 to 58 percent (SEDL, 2000).

In addition to the loss of individual teacher knowledge and skill in high-turnover schools, many researchers acknowledge that teacher turnover has a destabilizing effect on the school organization itself. Research in the area of organizational management and culture suggests "[while] too little turnover of employees is tied to stagnancy in organizations … high levels of employee turnover are found to be both cause and effect of problematic conditions and low performance" (Ingersoll, 2001, pp. 504-505). High turnover rates are likely to have particularly negative effects on the productivity of institutions such as schools. School and student performance depends to a large extent on organizational coherence and continuity, which are directly hindered by fluctuations in staff (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). In one recent study, high turnover schools were found to suffer from disruptions to the instructional program, piecemeal and often repetitive professional development, difficulties in teacher collaboration, and lack of trust among teachers (Guin, 2004).

The patterns of teacher turnover discussed above suggest a strong relationship between teacher labor force decisions and the characteristics of students and schools that,

more often than not, has detrimental effects on students and schools of poverty. While a growing body of empirical work exists on teacher turnover in high-poverty schools, the question "Why do teachers stay?" is as yet relatively untouched.

It is known that teachers' decisions to leave their assigned schools are a function of organizational (i.e., school and district) characteristics as well as individual teacher preferences. For example, Ingersoll (2001) found four organizational factors associated with high rates of teacher turnover: (a) inadequate support from the school administration, (b) student discipline problems, (c) limited faculty input into school decision-making, and (d) low salaries. Among teachers in urban, high-poverty public schools, he found a high incidence of two additional reasons given for teacher transfer to other schools: (a) lack of student motivation, and (b) lack of professional competence of colleagues.

It is reasonable to assume that teachers' decisions to do the opposite—choose to remain in their assigned schools—also are influenced by the structures and practices of the organizations in which they work as well as their individual preferences. As such, it is beneficial to examine the literature on teacher commitment for clues as to what factors might affect the willingness of skilled, experienced teachers to remain committed to high-poverty schools.

TEACHER COMMITMENT

Early research on employee retention and turnover centers largely on two ideas: attitude toward the job and job alternatives: "Job attitudes combined with job alternatives predict intent to leave, which is the direct antecedent to turnover" (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001, p. 1002). Of the two concepts, the first has been most closely examined, as employees' attitudes about their jobs are factors over which employers potentially have some influence. In contemporary organizational management literature,

the most common measures of job attitude are job satisfaction and employee commitment (Johns, 1996; Salancik, 1995).

The seminal work by Herzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman (1959) in the late 1950s laid the groundwork for research that continues today on job attitudes, factors determining those attitudes, and the effects of job attitudes on employees. Their stated purpose in studying job attitudes was to build a definitive understanding of human work motivation, particularly the meaningfulness of work in bureaucratic organizations of their era. Nearly 50 years later, much of their work remains relevant to investigating teacher labor force behavior. Among other things, the early work of Herzberg et al. brought attention to the differences between factors associated with work itself (i.e., the nature of the type of job or profession) and those associated with the specific workplace.

Influenced by the theories of Maslow, Herzberg et al. (1959) claimed that employees' needs for "self-actualization" are primary determinants of job attitude. The five factors most common among employees with high job attitudes were: achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, and advancement. The researchers identified a second class of needs associated with the particular job context and asserted these needs are secondary factors influencing job attitude. Among these workplace factors are company policy and administration, supervision associated with both technical and interpersonal issues, and working conditions. Further, data from their study led Herzberg et al. to hypothesize that the two classes of psychological need are not arrayed along a continuum, but rather are two more or less distinct sets of factors:

> Theoretically, given an individual operating from a neutral point, with neither positive nor negative attitudes towards his job, the satisfaction of the factors, which we may call the "satisfiers," would increase his job satisfaction beyond the neutral point. The absence of satisfaction to these factors would merely drop him back to this neutral level but would not turn him into a dissatisfied employee. Contrariwise, there should be a group of factors that would act as "dissatisfiers." Existence of these negative factors would lead to an unhappy employee. The

> satisfying of these factors, however, would not create a happy employee (pp. 111-112).

Although more recent research has yielded various other conceptualizations and measures of job attitude, the viability of this relatively simple construct of satisfaction playing out within two domains—that of work itself and that of a specific job context—continues to ring true. Since the time of Herzberg et al. (1959), there has been abundant research on job satisfaction in a wide range of occupational fields, including education. Indeed, Kottkamp (1990) asserts, "job and career satisfaction are without doubt the most studied of all teacher attitudes" (p. 97). And yet, as a result of his review of research on teacher attitudes, he concluded that the state of teacher attitude and job satisfaction research at that time had not yet led to an understanding of teacher behaviors in or relative to the workplace.

Satisfaction has, though, come to be widely accepted as an antecedent, or at least a correlate, of employee commitment in both the management literature (Cohen, 2003; Lambert, Hogan, & Barton, 2001) and the education literature (Bogler, 2001; Reyes, 1990; Rosenholtz, 1989). And the idea of two distinct but intersecting "worlds" to which teachers develop commitment—their work and their workplaces—continues to be useful as researchers examine the interconnections among teachers, the teaching profession, and school organizations (Firestone & Pennell, 1993; Somech and Bogler, 2002). In applying the concept of commitment to teachers, two types of commitment are widely discussed in the literature. The first is professional commitment, which is characterized by "client orientation, loyalty, professional autonomy, conformity to professional standards, and ethics" (Somech and Bogler, 2002, p. 558). The second, organizational commitment, centers on the teacher's commitment to the specific school in which she or he is working. Committed employees are more likely to be loyal to their organization, support

organizational goals, demonstrate positive work behaviors (e.g., low absenteeism), and exhibit motivation to perform well (Mitchell et al., 2001; Reyes, 1990; Somech & Bogler, 2002; Van Dick, 2001).

The concepts of satisfaction, professional commitment, and organizational commitment are further examined below.

Job Satisfaction

Although contemporary researchers appear to focus more commonly on why teachers *leave* than why they *stay*, a number of recent studies report findings specific to factors influencing teacher job satisfaction. A comparison of the results yields a few common themes (Table 1).

First, highly satisfied teachers report positive relationships with many other people in the school organization. They describe reliance, first and foremost, on "collegial, collaborative" relationships with fellow teachers and staff (Ascher, 1991; Green & Manke, 2001; Reyes et al., 1999). Relationships with fellow educators appear to be so fundamental to teacher commitment that Scott, Stone, & Dinham (2001) recommend encouragement and expanded support for professional relationships as an important strategy for countering teacher dissatisfaction in the workplace. A productive relationship with another key member of the school organization, the principal, also is critical to many teachers. This relationship typically is described as "highly supportive" and often marked by "strong administrator leadership" (Ascher, 1991; NCES, 1997). Finally, satisfied teachers report they highly value the success of the students with whom they interact (Green & Manke, 2001; Johnson & Birkeland, 2002; NCES, 1997; Scott et al., 2001).

Table 1. Comparative Research on Teacher Satisfaction

Research study	Satisfaction
Ascher (1991) – an urban study of organizational conditions that influence teachers.	• Staff collegiality • Teacher control over curriculum and instruction • Teacher influence on school decisions • Strong supportive principal leadership • Good physical working conditions
Bogler (2001) – a survey of over 700 teachers, examining influence of principal leadership style on teacher job satisfaction.	• Occupational prestige • Self-esteem • Autonomy at work • Work and professional self-development
Green & Manke (2001) - ethnographic research on 12 retired female teachers who began their careers between 1930 and 1955 and taught for 25 or more years.	• Success with students • Professional learning and growth • Good relationships with colleagues
Johnson and Birkeland (2002) – early results of a longitudinal study of work experiences and career decisions of new teachers in Massachusetts.	• Success with students • Living wage and respectable status • Professional learning and growth
National Center for Education Statistics (1997) – the Schools and Staffing Survey conducted since late 1980s; includes data on teacher migration and attrition.	• Administrative support and leadership • Good student behavior • Teacher autonomy • Positive school atmosphere
Reyes, Scribner, and Paredes Scribner (1999) – a study of the features characterizing high-performing schools serving Hispanic students in south Texas	• Curricular and instructional innovation • Site-based decision-making • Support for all learning community members to reach their potential • Collegial, collaborative work environment
Scott, Stone, and Dinham (2001) – a multi-national comparative study of teacher work motivation and satisfaction in Australia, New Zealand, England, and the United States.	• Success with students • Cooperative working relationships with colleagues • Opportunities to gain competence and professional development

A second theme across the seven studies is teacher participation in school decision-making (Ingersoll, 2001; NCES, 1997; Reyes et al., 1999). Ascher (1991) identifies two types of participation associated with teacher satisfaction: teacher influence over technical decisions (curriculum and instruction) and teacher involvement in managerial decisions (through site-based decision-making or other formal avenues).

Professional learning and growth is a third theme sounded by teachers in these studies (Green & Manke, 2001; Johnson & Birkeland, 2002). In their multi-national investigation of teacher satisfaction, Scott et al. (2001) report opportunities to gain competence and professional development to be associated with high levels of teacher satisfaction. A study of eight south Texas schools that serve economically poor Hispanic students found that practices among the schools reflect a priority for individual growth and mutual learning not only among students but also among teachers and all other adults involved in the school (Reyes et al., 1999).

Professional Commitment

The definition and assumptions about this form of commitment are drawn largely from the work of Weick and McDaniel (1989), who assert professionals have certain characteristics that differentiate them from workers in other occupations. Professionals are individuals who:

> Through special training and socialization have gained a unique set of understandings . . . Their attitudes about themselves and their work is different, and they have a different commitment to their calling (p. 333).

A teacher's commitment to the profession of teaching, then, can be understood primarily from a psychological perspective as an affective connection to certain ideals and intentions associated with the use of teaching knowledge (Reyes, 1990; Somech & Bolger, 2002; Weick & McDaniel, 1989). The professional commitment of teachers is said to be unusually high, compared to that of people in other professions: "virtually all

relevant evidence portrays a level of commitment to their 'clients' by teachers that other organizations can only dream of with their employees" (Leithwood, Stienbach, & Jantzi, 2002, p. 115). Some of the studies highlighted above clearly signal the presence of certain attitudes and behaviors associated with teachers' commitment to their profession.

First, professional commitment can easily conjure up the image of "the ideal teacher" that arose in the early 20th century United States—an image that has, for good or ill, persisted into the 21st century. In this image, the teacher is a "selfless altruist, dedicated soldier, patriot, saint, or redeemer" (Joseph, 2001, p. 136) who is motivated by the intrinsic rewards of teaching children and serving society. In the interviews with long-tenured, retired teachers, Green and Manke (2001) found the women were motivated primarily by intrinsic factors, such as "dedication." All of the teachers in the study demonstrated what the researchers interpreted to be "an inward-turning focus … [and] ambivalence about the relationship between remuneration and service" (p. 48). It is common for professional commitment in some fields to not include the desire or expectation for certain material compensation (Weick & McDaniel, 1989).

From another perspective, the characteristics of professional commitment among teachers might be interpreted as ideological in nature. The qualitative study conducted in Australia, New Zealand, England, and the United States found experienced teachers in all four nations to be highly motivated by a "desire to work with and for people, and to 'make a difference' by assisting children and young people to reach their potential, experience success, and grow into responsible adults" (Scott et al., 2001, p. 5). A similar commitment was expressed by teachers new to the profession; in the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, undertaken by the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the bottom line for study participants was described as "a sense of success" with students. The researchers reported new teachers' conceptions of their career as follows,

highlighting the continued perception of teaching among many as either a commitment to students or to serving society:

> Some teachers entering schools today make a long-term commitment to teaching, while others expect to stay only a few years, contributing to society before moving on to other lines of work (Johnson & Birkland, 2002, p. 5).

Professionals, by definition, appear then to have a different relationship to their organizations. Just as professionals are distinguished by their expertise and values, professional organizations are driven by expertise and values (Weick & McDaniel, 1989). Professional teachers tend to have a natural investment in how the knowledge and skills associated with teaching are carried out in the school in which they work. For example, the two types of participation Ascher (1991) found to be associated with teacher satisfaction were identified by Somech & Bogler (2002) as positively related to teacher commitment. Teacher influence over technical decisions (curriculum and instruction), in particular, contribute to professional commitment; and teacher involvement in managerial decisions contributes to both professional and organizational forms of commitment.

Organizational Commitment

The organizational commitment of employees was characterized early on by Mowday, Steers, & Porter (1979) as consisting of three psychological dimensions: identification, involvement, and loyalty. This triad has come to be widely accepted in both the general organizational and educational administration literatures and is acknowledged in many contemporary investigations of teachers and their workplace commitments (Firestone & Pennell, 1993; Reyes, 1990; Somech & Bolger, 2002). Applied to education, a teacher's organizational commitment would be described as:

- Identification with the organization (e.g., embracing and helping to achieve the school's goals);

- Involvement with the organization (e.g., putting forth effort beyond minimum expectations in the classroom and school-wide); and
- Loyalty to the organization (e.g., voluntary, long-term retention on the teaching staff).

In looking at organizational commitment from a more sociological perspective, Rosenholtz (1989) asserts that the most vital resources required by schools are those contributed by teachers:

> Not only are the quality of these contributions related integrally to school goals; they are ultimately the means by which other resources are acquired. . . . central to a school's quality is its ability to motivate teachers to make continuing contributions to it rather than to some competing organization (p. 140).

Rosenholtz's analysis from data gathered in eight Tennessee school districts yielded a set of three variables associated with the organizational commitment of teachers:

- Task autonomy and discretion (i.e., degree of personal responsibility for results, freedom to exercise judgment and choice, control over the terms of work);
- Psychic rewards (i.e., successful outcomes of one's work); and
- Learning opportunities (i.e., opportunities to master and enhance knowledge and skills that are meaningful, relationship of work to one's personal values and beliefs, growth).

Some of the studies of teacher satisfaction highlighted above include findings clearly associated with the organizational commitment of teachers. The importance of autonomy at work, particularly in the form of control over curriculum and instruction, was explicit (Ascher, 1991; Bogler, 2001; NCES, 1997), as was the opportunity for personal and professional development (Bogler, 2001; Johnson & Birkeland, 2002; Reyes et al., 1999; Scott et al., 2001).

Although it is useful to consider teacher professional commitment and organizational commitment as separate concepts, they are recognized to often function interdependently. In other cases, the two can be at odds. For example, Firestone and Pennell (1993) proposed that a teacher's commitments to the students in her/his assigned school may differ from and even conflict with commitments to the school organization itself. Somech and Bogler (2002) agree, asserting that commitments to certain professional values can run counter to the norms or organizational rules of a particular school. Although Weick and McDaniel (1989) assert there are no inherent conflicts between a professional's commitment to the profession and to her/his particular organization, they suggest, "the congruence of professional and organizational goals provides the best indicator of the degree to which the organization and the professional are compatible" (p. 339). Weick and McDaniel go further to suggest that a professional organization will, by definition, have compatible goals with that of its employees—unless it is, instead, "simply an organization with professionals working in it" (p. 339).

Chapter 3: Methodology

INTRODUCTION

Given the critical relationships among student success, teacher quality, and teacher turnover in high-poverty schools, it is important to gain greater insight into the factors that influence the commitment of teachers to such schools. At the heart of the inquiry is the assumption that teacher turnover in high-poverty schools is due, largely, to the mismanagement of the existing teacher workforce—not insufficient teacher supply or rising teacher demand. If we want to be able to encourage teacher commitment, we need to learn more about how the phenomenon is influenced by the school organization itself as well as by individual teachers' attitudes and experiences outside the school.

The overarching goal of this dissertation research is to better understand the dynamics of teacher commitment, particularly as it relates to the organizational characteristics of high-poverty schools. Through interpreting new knowledge resulting from the research, a secondary goal is to identify key issues for administrators and policymakers to consider as they take action toward obtaining the commitment of experienced, skilled teachers to work in schools of poverty. To achieve these goals, the study was designed to answer two questions:

1. What does "commitment" mean to teachers who work in high-poverty schools?
2. What factors appear to affect teachers' commitment to work in such schools?

Few studies have tackled these questions in earnest, yet the stakes are high for students of poverty educated in district environments marked by inequitable distribution of teacher quality. Findings of this study, considered in light of existing research on teacher commitment, may point to new strategies for successfully engaging the full

participation of experienced, skilled teachers in meeting today's demands on high-poverty schools.

This chapter discusses the perspectives and procedures associated with my research design, collection of data, analysis of data, and interpretation of results.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND PARAMETERS

Methodological Approach

In brief, this research is a qualitative interview study conducted from a constructivist orientation. Teacher commitment was explored via face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with teachers presently working in high-poverty schools, and data were analyzed using a mix of inductive and interpretive methods. The chosen methodological approach adheres to the broad definition of qualitative research offered by Denzin and Lincoln (1998):

> Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalist approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3).

Although Denzin and Lincoln (1998) assert, "Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (p. 8), there exist important differences among qualitative paradigms in terms of the researcher's stance on each of these assumptions and the extent to which they influence how she/he interprets and reports results. The world view, or ontology, inherent in the constructivist paradigm assumes there exists no single, knowable reality. Reality is a human construction, in that an individual teacher, for example, brings to each new experience in the profession and in specific school organizations a unique perspective that filters the experience and helps determine its personal meaning to the teacher at that time. The teacher's perspective on

"teaching" and "school" develops over time, however. It is not static. New experience also yields new learning, which is integrated into her/his current perspective—confirming or altering previous understandings of teaching as a profession and of schools as workplaces. Furthermore, just as the teachers who participated in this research understand the world from their respective vantage points, I brought to the research site my own unique set of experiences and perspectives. As a result, the reality of teacher commitment as described and analyzed in this report is, to some extent, a co-constructed reality.

Epistemologically, the knowledge about teacher commitment I report here should be viewed predominantly as a representation of 17 individual teachers' realities, as I came to understand them during and following one or more in-person interviews. Although the research questions lend themselves to taking a broader, ethnographic approach to building knowledge, the time intensity of such a study was beyond my reach. In choosing to implement an interview study, I attempted to maximize the strengths of face-to-face interaction and minimize (or at least recognize) its weaknesses. I sought guidance from four unique but complementary sources of qualitative expertise in developing interview guides, conducting the interviews, and analyzing data (Fontana & Frey, 1998; Hatch, 2002; Scheurich, 1997; Spradley, 1979).

Researcher Credibility

All scientific observation and analysis, whether quantitative or qualitative in method, is filtered through definitions and perspectives chosen by the researcher, explicitly or implicitly. Qualitative approaches that reject positivist assertions of objectivity assert it is impossible to be completely free of bias in research. The researcher must thus be diligent in surfacing, to the greatest extent possible, her/his biases and making them transparent in planning, collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data:

> The point is to be aware of how one's perspective affects fieldwork, to carefully document all procedures so that others can review methods for bias, and to be open in describing the limitations of the perspective presented (Patton, 1990, p. 480, 482).

A brief discussion of my personal and professional background is offered here to provide readers with both the basis for my credibility as a researcher in the Texas public school arena and a sense of the likely nature of my contributions to (and impositions on) this particular study. Socio-economically, I am a white, middle-class female who, until recently, could not say that I "identify" with people who have experienced discrimination in school or encountered challenges to their educational success. I now possess a high degree of empathy for students in the latter situation, after working with close family members who—as adults or near-adults—suddenly began to struggle with previously undiagnosed learning differences.

I have a long history of direct involvement in public education, beginning with 16 years as the stereotypical "good student" in a small Midwestern town. I remember no difficulties with academic learning, seemed to meet my teachers' and parents' expectations easily, and have always enjoyed being a student. Following college graduation and a six-year stint of wandering in the occupational desert, I entered teaching for a third time and have never left the field. My vita shows six years as a teacher in public elementary and middle schools, a three-year period of assistant principalships in four schools (serving two schools per year), twelve years in a federally-funded education research and development laboratory, and four years in the Texas Education Agency (i.e., state department of education). All except two years of this professional experience have been in the state of Texas. Three of the seven schools in which I worked in the state serve large populations of high-poverty students, many of whom are Hispanic or African-American; one school also has a high Spanish-dominant student and parent community.

This long and diverse professional history in the public education arena gave me much in common with the teachers I interviewed, which has its benefits but also its potential drawbacks. Beyond sharing certain knowledge that has come to be embedded in the profession and being very aware of past and present trends in public school curriculum, instruction, and organization, I am very familiar with the state–specific curriculum, student assessments, and public school accountability system. These linkages allow me to share certain points of reference and have a common language with teachers in general, which I think often enabled me to focus more quickly on teachers' expressions of opinion and emotion rather than getting caught up in the need to define acronyms or clarify education jargon. On the other hand, this familiarity also may have caused me to slide into assumptions of an insider status I did not possess. These kinds of apparently shared knowledge represent potential barriers as well as facilitators during data collection where, for example, the researcher needs to recognize when it is important to have participants define and elaborate on terms and concepts. The risk continues during analysis, when assumed meanings can serve as filters for, or even blinders to, study participants' meanings.

Philosophically, I have always been a believer in the public schools. As someone who has experienced, observed, analyzed, and written about schools from a number of different vantage points, I have come also to be a teacher advocate and, often, a critic of both policy and public action on behalf of (or against) children and public education. Most importantly, perhaps, I brought to the current study four prior experiences with interview research (including a pilot study for the dissertation proposal). I very much enjoyed these experiences, valued what I learned, and now view them as useful apprenticeships in the art and science of qualitative research. What I learned well and what I failed to learn both influenced the conduct of this study of teacher commitment.

The Place of Substantive Theory

As discussed in Chapter 2, two bodies of existing literature informed the focus and basic assumptions of the present research study. The first—studies of workplace commitment—informed the initial framing of the study and the first round of data collection. It consists of empirical evidence from the fields of organizational management and education administration describing the human experience of commitment as a social-psychological set of attitudes. In the workplace, commitment is influenced by organizational factors and, in turn, informs employee behaviors. The studies examined were conducted either from a post-positivist or constructivist perspective. Although many of the researchers clearly assume that teacher commitment is a knowable phenomenon, most also admit that commitment is largely context-specific and that research, to date, has not yielded a widely agreed-upon definition of commitment. An increasing acceptance of commitment as a multi-dimensional phenomenon (Cohen, 2003; Somech & Bogler, 2002) compounds the issue, if one hopes to identify a generalizable set of factors that can be said to lead to teacher commitment. Commitment literature also served as the substantive theoretical basis for analyzing data from the first round of interviews with participants.

Data analysis after the first round of teacher interviews yielded a number of themes regarding participants' organizational commitment. The most consistent theme involved the importance of relationships to teachers in high-poverty schools. These relationships vary from teacher to teacher, are typically self-initiated or emerge in response to events that are not necessarily predictable, and would be difficult to "prescribe" as strategies for encouraging and supporting teacher commitment. Yet patterns among the relationships, as discussed in Chapter 4, can be identified; they appear

to meet multiple and diverse needs of teachers and some appear to be particularly critical to sustaining teacher commitment in a high-poverty school.

I designed a second round of interviews of a subset of teacher participants to (a) serve as a member check of this finding (i.e., the importance of relationships to teacher commitment in high-poverty schools) and (b) probe the meanings teachers ascribe to the relationships they report, as related to their decisions to continue teaching in their currently-assigned high-poverty school or to leave the school.

Guidance from a Pilot Study

In preparation for designing the present study, a pilot study was undertaken with five teachers at a single school site. The focus of the study was on teacher retention in the school, which is an academically successful, high-poverty elementary school in a district that neighbors the one in which the larger study would be conducted. Analysis of interview data yielded three themes I considered potentially relevant to factors influencing teachers' decisions to teach at high poverty schools similar to this school:

1. Interdependence among teachers, which was described by each teacher in at least one of four different manners: family, friends and companions, what I termed "philosophical allies," and professional colleagues.
2. Cultural richness, which was expressed through three avenues: institutionalized school events and activities, teacher/staff recreation outside of school, and school culture-specific discourse.
3. Evidence of what I termed "maturity of focus" among the more experienced teachers.

The themes that emerged from the Old Town pilot give support to the likelihood that teacher retention in high-poverty schools is due, at least in part, to some aspect of teacher commitment that (a) involves colleagues as well as students and (b) is tied in

some way to features of the organization. The case also offered insights into at least one other factor that was considered during full-phase research design. The theme, maturity of focus, suggested an evolution of the individual teacher's conception of his/her job, which is necessarily accompanied by change in the nature and source of commitment. Also, in the last two pilot study interviews, the teachers discussed a major shift in how their district was planning to respond to the school accountability environment. This shift, which had recently occurred, and the different tenor of these two interviews compared to the previous ones raised questions for me regarding the effects of environmental change (e.g., district practice, state policy) on teacher commitment.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Methodological "Fit"

The two questions driving this research are well suited to a qualitative interview study for a number of reasons. First, while a growing body of empirical work exists on teacher turnover in high-poverty schools, the question "Why do teachers stay?" is as yet relatively untouched. A semi-structured interview, by definition, allows the researcher to approach an unexplored issue unconstrained by predetermined categories of analysis, allowing for in-depth, open, and detailed inquiry (Patton, 1990).

Second, although a teacher's decision to leave a workplace may be a conscious choice precipitated by a well-remembered series of events, the "decision" to stay is likely to be the result of a less self-conscious weighing of factors and be less readily articulated by an individual. An interview study lends itself to "attempting to understand the meaning of human experience … [by] obtaining the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 11).

Finally and most fundamentally, the intent of this study is to understand human behavior. The phenomenon of teacher commitment demands investigation of the multiple factors inherent in individual labor force decision-making behavior. A teacher's decision to remain in or leave a particular school is not necessarily influenced by only one or two factors. A semi-structured interview approach is particularly well suited to "uncovering the meaning structures that [research] participants use to organize their experiences and make sense of their worlds" (Hatch, 2002, p. 94).

"Any explanation of behavior which excludes what the actors themselves know, how they define their actions, remains a partial explanation that distorts the human situation" (Spradley, 1979, p. 13). We know that some teachers work until 9 at night and some go home 15 minutes after the buses leave the parking lot. We know that some teachers socialize with colleagues only at holiday parties while others get together weekly. To know what these behaviors mean to the teachers, though, we need to ask them. A face-to-face conversation, in a place that is familiar and comfortable, for the explicit purpose of talking about your experiences as a teacher and why you teach where you do is a rare invitation for most teachers. As my interview tapes and transcripts attest, most study participants needed little prompting to offer elaborate responses to very general, open-ended questions. In many cases, the results are rich and varied self-reflections.

Limitations of Data Collection by Interview

The nature of interview-based research brings certain limitations as well as benefits. During data collection, as I questioned, listened, and worked to clarify meanings with teachers, I attempted to remain aware of three factors highlighted by Scheurich (1997) in his discussion of the challenges of qualitative interviewing.

Questions are interpreted uniquely by each interviewee. The personal histories and unique experiences of interviewees, and the interviewer as well, have shaped their perspectives on concepts that arise in the interview. In addition, "multiple intentions and desires, some of which are consciously known and some of which are not" (Scheurich, 1997, p. 62) influence the interpretation of questions asked and answered during the interview. For example, many teachers had personal experiences as non-English speaking students in English-dominant schools. Teachers' philosophies regarding the purposes of bilingual education were seldom directly articulated, but they certainly filtered their understanding of questions about their work with bilingual students.

Interviews take place in different contexts. The time of day, the place, events that have occurred just prior to the interview—myriad contextual factors influence the mental and emotional orientations interviewee and interviewer bring into the interview interaction. The power of context has influence not only among different interviewees: "the same set of questions asked by the same interviewer of the same interviewee can often elicit significantly different answers at different times or different places" (Scheurich, 1997, p. 62). This limitation of an interview study was exemplified in my interviews with one study participant in particular. During my 2003-04 interview with an Early Childhood teacher, I was surprised and puzzled that she didn't remember experiencing what I had understood to be an unusual paperwork burden during 2002-03. In the previous year's interview, she had expressed great frustration with the extra work she had taken on all year due to a colleague's inexperience, but in the second year she had only a vague memory of the problem. In reflecting on this clear misinterpretation on my part, I realized that the time at which data were collected might be a factor. Both rounds of interviews were conducted in the final weeks of the school year, one year apart. Although this point in time allowed me to potentially benefit from study participants'

ability to reflect across an entire year of experiences in the profession and at a particular school, it also is perhaps the most stressful time of year for teachers. Most teachers confront the completion of additional paperwork, such as updating students' cumulative folders, accounting for textbooks and curriculum materials, and more; but this particular study participant, as a special education teacher, was facing even more record-keeping and report production due to the occurrence of most annual Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) committee meetings in the spring.

Interviews rarely achieve moments of shared meaning. The co-construction of meaning by interviewer and interviewee is vulnerable not only to the unconscious influence of contextual factors, but also to the influence of conscious but unacknowledged differences between the two people interacting. As example:

> There may be incidences of dominance and resistance over large or small issues. There may be monologues. There may be times when one participant is talking about one thing but thinking about something else. A participant may be saying what she thinks she ought to say; in fact, much of the interaction may be infused with a shift between performed or censured statements and unperformed and uncensored statements (Scheurich, 1997, p. 67).

This limitation was illustrated most clearly in two interviews in which participants seemed to be selecting their words with care. All the way to the end of each conversation, I had a sense the teacher was never at ease. Also, on more than one occasion, teachers clarified initially tentative observations or revisited a topic to offer what appeared to be a more critical assessment of a school issue or a relationship with another person on staff.

Limitations of Interview Analysis

The analysis phase of an interview study begins with data that have been collected under conditions subject to the limitations just discussed. In undertaking analysis and

interpretation of data after collection and transcription, I attempted to be aware of additional limitations said to be inherent in interview methodology (Scheurich, 1997):

Transcriptions of recorded interviews are rarely complete. Even the careful inclusion of all audible events that took place during the interviews (pauses, throat clearings, other utterances) cannot replicate the nuances of voice inflection or changing pace of interviewee articulations. Further, transcriptions are technologically unable to include non-verbal communication events. Thus, analyses are conducted on interview data that literally contain gaps and holes.

Analysis of data is, by definition, the construction of meaning. Analysis of interview data by the interviewer-researcher, thus, is constrained by the body of pre-existing meanings she/he carries into the analysis. Scheurich asserts, "The interpreter of the interview transcript is actually a larger and more formative part of the process than is the interview transcript" (Scheurich, 1997, p. 77). Just as "more" data collection (i.e., multiple interviews) does not guarantee "better" data, an extended period of reading, testing, organizing and re-organizing the data "is not necessarily a road to clearer and deeper understanding" (p. 77).

Site Selection Criteria and Process

Great care was taken to identify a research site that appeared to exhibit a high degree of most, if not all, characteristics that I determined were important to understanding teacher commitment in high-poverty schools. Multiple criteria were used in taking what might be called an intensity approach to identifying a sample of one. That is, although the school organization itself was not the focus of study, it needed to be an information-rich site that would, potentially, "manifest the phenomenon [of teacher commitment] intensely, but not extremely" (Patton, 1990, p. 182). It was insufficient to simply select a high-poverty school that would offer research access to teachers. School

performance was considered the most critical factor, given the important relationship between teacher quality and student performance indicated in the literature. Range of teacher tenure clearly was an important factor, if teacher commitment is accompanied, to some extent, by low levels of teacher turnover. I considered diversity among other characteristics of the school's student and teacher populations to provide important workplace variations against which to interpret teacher perceptions of their experience.

The selection of a single school rather than multiple research sites was to allow data collection and analysis to focus on how the interaction between teachers and the school organization contributes to, or discourages, the development and maintenance of commitment. A single school grounds individual participant data in an environment that can be considered relatively common to all in terms of student and parent community demographics, long-standing organizational structures and traditions and, of course, certain teaching and non-teaching colleagues who were on staff at the same time.

Given the focus of my research questions, the chosen methodology, and personal travel constraints, I determined the most suitable research site would be a school within a 30-mile radius of my university. Three criteria guided my search for potential sites in the school districts within this geographic area. All candidates for the research site were schools that:

1. Served a percentage of low socio-economic students higher than the district average;
2. Earned a higher than average rating in the Texas public school accountability system in school year 2001-02;
3. Had demonstrated a pattern of achievement gain for all student groups included in the school rating over the recent five-year period (since 1997-1998).

The rationale for a socioeconomic criterion is self-evident, given the high-poverty school context for this research. The purpose for school and student performance criteria may be less obvious. As discussed in Chapter 2, the relationship between teacher characteristics, including those related to teacher turnover, and student success is basic to the rationale for studying teacher commitment. Although this study does not propose a specific definition or measure(s) for teacher quality, identification of participants was guided by the school principal's and teachers' personal definitions of a "good teacher" and a "committed teacher." This is further discussed below. In addition, there exists some research and considerable logic to the idea that "good" and "committed" teachers may work in low-performing, high-poverty schools, but their strengths apparently don't have positive effects on student performance much beyond their own classrooms. In light of the broader assumptions and purpose of the current research, a study of the factors influencing such teachers' commitment to their schools would be seriously lacking.

A set of six schools in the same school district were identified as suitable candidates for the research site. All were elementary schools serving student populations of whom at least 85 percent were economically disadvantaged, well over both the district average and the state's definition of a high-poverty school (i.e., one in which over 50% of students enrolled are economically disadvantaged). Each school reflected a similar profile of academic success under the Texas public school accountability system. Examination of data provided in the state's Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) revealed that each school had received an accountability rating of *Recognized* in school year 2001-02. In that year, a campus rating of *Recognized* required that at least 80 percent of all students and each student group in the state's accountability subset (African American, Hispanic, White, and economically disadvantaged) passed each subject area of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), the state-mandated criterion-referenced test.

Finally, performance had been rising at each school since 1997-98 for all four student groups, even though the state of Texas had progressively increased performance standards throughout the period. Excluding one school that had unusually high increases because of extremely low passing rates in 1998, the other five schools showed the following changes over the five-year period in the rate at which students passed all TAAS tests taken:

- Increases in African American student passing rates ranged from 3 to 26 percentage points;
- Increases in Hispanic student rates ranged from 6 to 20 percentage points;
- Increases in the passing rates of economically disadvantaged students ranged from 8 to 18 percentage points.

In consultation with central office staff of the participating school district, I approached the principals of all six schools for permission to solicit teacher participation in the study. One principal declined. Using a second set of criteria, I compared data available from the Texas' Public Information Management System (PEIMS) and the school district on the other five schools (see Site Selection Criteria, Appendix). The schools were then ranked according to (a) student characteristics, (b) teacher turnover, and (c) teacher characteristics. The school selected through this process stood out in the following ways:

- As was the case with the other four schools, over 70 percent of students were Hispanic. The student population was, however, one of the two most diverse in terms of enrolling students from other ethnicities and those with limited English proficiency.

- Although the most recent teacher turnover data available showed two schools to have lower turnover rates that year, those schools also had less diverse faculties either in terms of teacher ethnicity or professional experience.

In keeping with the requirements of the University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin) Office of Research Support and Compliance, a proposal for the study was submitted to and approved by the UT-Austin Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB). The IRB was amended and renewed twice, allowing for dissertation research to include an initial round of interviews at the end of school year 2002-03 and a follow-up set of interviews at the end of school year 2003-04.

Study Participants

A simple chain sampling, or snowball, technique was used to identify potential participants for the study. The first three teachers were identified by the school principal, whom I asked to recommend individuals she considered to be "strong teachers" and good candidates for participating in a study about teacher commitment. After interviewing the two teachers, I asked each to recommend other teachers either presently or formerly on staff who, by their own definition, they considered to be "really good," "effective," "committed to the profession," "committed to this school," and/or "dedicated to working with high poverty students."

Although these first two participants did not recommend the same colleagues, as more interviews were conducted a number of teachers were recommended by more than one colleague. This convergence of recommendations was particularly important to my selection of former teachers who had chosen to leave the school a year or two before. The final group of 17 study participants consisted of two subgroups of teachers: 12 who were working at the school in 2002-03 and 5 others who had transferred from the school to other high-poverty campuses in the same district.

The purposeful sampling approach used to identify individual participants clearly differs from that used in site selection. Identification of participants through chain sampling made use of the personal knowledge teachers have of others in the pool of potential participants. In this particular case, an approach termed "criterion sampling" was embedded in the chain sampling strategy (Patton, 1990) when teachers were asked to recommend colleagues and former colleagues who met a specified but undefined criterion. Beyond this, I contacted potential participants based on the demographic variation they would contribute to the final group of study participants.

At the point of the follow-up interviews in spring 2004, the overall teaching experience of my 17 study participants ranged from 4 to 39 years. Tenures at Old Town Elementary, of the teachers still working there, were between 4 and 19 years. Although the range of overall teaching experience is wide, the majority of teachers are on either the low or high end: seven were novice teachers (1-5 years experience) and six had over 20 years experience. The percentage of teachers school-wide with 5 years or less teaching experience was 55 percent in school year 2003-04, while the district average was just 38 percent. The proportion of high-experience teachers at Old Town was nearly the same as district-wide: 21 to 22 percent. It is easy to see that this distribution of teacher experience means Old Town has a low percentage of teachers with experience in the mid-range, that is, those who are no longer novices and, potentially, have many years ahead of them in which to contribute skills and knowledge to the school. District-wide, 41 percent of teachers have 6 to 20 years experience. At Old Town, only 22 percent of teachers are in this category. Three study respondents teaching at the school in school years 2002-03 and 2003-04 had this mid-range level of experience, and two of the five former teachers did as well.

Although all 12 of the Old Town teachers interviewed in spring 2003 remained teaching there in school year 2003-04, three teachers—all of them novices—did not return the following school year. Also of interest is that three of the former teachers had taught at Old Town for at least 7 years before transferring elsewhere. This means the school had also recently lost teachers who were in that important mid-range of their career and had demonstrated some degree of commitment to Old Town before choosing to transfer to another high-poverty school.

Fifty-three percent of study participants are Hispanic and forty-seven percent are White. In 2003-04, less than 3 percent of teachers were African American. This compares to a student population of less than 8 percent African American in 2003-04, which was a decrease from 2002-03. Most of the study participants are female; 18 percent are male, compared to 12 percent male teachers school-wide that same year. Over 50 percent of Old Town students are Limited English Proficient, and 9 of the 17 teachers interviewed teach bilingual classrooms at their grade level or work as bilingual specialists. Of the 17 participants, 14 received their teaching certification from a college of education while the other 3 hold alternative certification earned through the program at Region XIII Education Service Center. Interestingly, four teachers entered teaching as a second career—two after working in the business sector, one after 10 years as an aide in public schools, and one after 7 years in a Montessori after-school program.

In total, the 17 participants in my study create a diverse set of teachers who offered important insights into the professional and organizational factors influencing the decisions of individual teachers to remain committed to or leave a high-poverty school.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection began in spring 2003, with a visit to the school to meet the principal, gain an overview of the school community, and discuss how I would contact

potential participants. At that time I also toured the school on my own, making a photographic record of certain physical features in the building and taking written note of other observations. As face-to-face interviews were the major data source in this study, I conducted only this and one other brief observation at the school site, to gather contextual information for the interviews. I reviewed the school's 2002-03 Campus Improvement Plan, which the district requires be updated annually, and examined data in the school's Academic Excellence Indicator Reports, which are available from the Texas Education Agency. I used information and data in these documents informally to build general knowledge of the school's demographic and academic history, again to draw upon during interviews. In producing this report, these minimal but important unobtrusive data were used formally to describe the school site in this Methodology chapter and to sketch the narrative picture of Old Town Elementary School in Chapter 4, which introduces the Research Findings discussion.

First Round Interviews

The primary data collection took place in late spring and summer of 2003. Twelve teachers working at Old Town Elementary School during school year 2002-03 and five teachers who were formerly employed at the school were interviewed between April 16 and July 30, 2003.

I solicited participation through electronic mail, one by one, as teachers were recommended by already-interviewed colleagues. Interviews were arranged at various locations and various times of day, always for the convenience of the teacher; by the end of the 17 interviews, arrangements ranged from teachers' classrooms during their preparation periods, to a Starbucks coffee shop after school, to a teacher's condominium while she waited for a ceiling fan installer to arrive. Following a brief reminder of the purpose of my study and a review of the participant consent agreement, each teacher had

an opportunity to ask questions and make a final decision to participate. Typically, the interview, 45 to 60 minutes in length, immediately followed.

Design of the interview was informed by (a) my research questions, (b) findings from the pilot study, and (c) literature on employee and teacher commitment from the fields of organizational management and educational administration (see Chapter 2). From the latter source, I accepted the idea that at least two types of commitment, "professional" and "organizational," are likely to be unique and important in teachers' work lives. The interview guide consisted of a series of six broad, open-ended questions that invited study participants to share experiences and perceptions about their teaching careers and their teaching positions at Old Town Elementary School or, if no longer employed there, at their current school of assignment. Questions in three of the topic areas gathered background information on why and how teachers entered the teaching profession, how they came to be assigned to Old Town Elementary School, and how they conceive of their future careers. The central focus of the interview was on the other three topic areas, in which questions solicited information relevant to the factors that influence teachers' decisions to remain committed to the profession and their decisions to continue working in or leave Old Town Elementary School (see First Round Interview Guide in Appendix).

In keeping with the standards and methods of formal but semi-structured interviewing, the interview guide included topics I selected in advance but the sequence and actual wording of questions were determined in the course of each interview. In action, each interview was driven by the content of my interactions with the participant. Probing questions were asked in response to information and perspectives offered by the individual teacher. In general, I took to heart the admonition, "To learn about people we must remember to treat them as people, and they will uncover their lives to us" (Fontana

& Frey, 1998, p. 73). More concretely, I tried to make use of all that I have learned about asking simple questions clearly, waiting for people to think, and listening to what they choose to share. To encourage teachers to clarify spontaneous responses or elaborate on experiences that seemed important to them, I drew on my familiarity with what Spradley (1979) terms *descriptive questions* and *structural questions*. Descriptive questions encourage interviewees to paint a picture of the context within which an event or activity took place, allowing the researcher to collect more and richer examples of how they "see" (and thus name and ascribe meaning to) their world. Structural questions prompt interviewees to provide examples or otherwise reveal how they organize their reality, allowing the researcher to collect data that may more clearly point to the differences and similarities among study participants' experiences and perspectives. The use of these techniques usually led to stories or additional detail that was helpful to my interpretation of their meaning. Occasionally, it led to a lengthy monologue about their particular teaching specialization or an immediate frustration they were experiencing.

This open but still-focused approach to interviewing is said to (a) make data collection somewhat systematic while increasing the comprehensiveness of data collected, (b) allow for logical gaps in data to be anticipated and closed, and (c) guide a fairly conversational and situational interaction with study participants (Patton, 1990, p. 288). As a result, each interview was unique in terms of if and when certain topics were discussed. The major disadvantage I experienced was at the initial point of data analysis. Due to the flexibility in question sequencing and the fact that teachers would often return to issues discussed earlier in the interview, initial sorting and grouping of teachers' comments across interviews was a challenge. The use of qualitative data management software (N6, produced by QSR, International) helped somewhat with this task.

Follow-up Interviews

In a constructivist study, if participants "are not involved in the analysis process directly, they are almost always given an opportunity to see and give feedback on findings before they are finalized" (Hatch, p. 45). A second interview with selected teachers was used to accomplish this goal of having study participants verify and elaborate key findings from my analysis of first round data.

Of the 12 teachers on staff in 2002-03, all taught again at Old Town Elementary in 2003-04. A subset of the original 17 study participants was contacted and all agreed to a second interview, including two of the former Old Town teachers. I also interviewed the school principal after all teacher interviews were complete. A check of the school district website midway through the following school year (2004-05) revealed that 9 of the original 12 teachers on staff remained at Old Town. All three of the teachers who left were novice teachers. One had told me in her spring 2003 interview that she had already resigned and intended to teach in a neighboring district. Another had indicated she would likely leave if the principal were unable to move her to a different grade level for the next school year. There was no evidence the other teacher had transferred to another district school, so apparently he, too, had left the district.

The intended function of the follow-up interview, as a member check, was expanded to include a second purpose. As discussed earlier in this chapter, analysis of first round interviews resulted in identification of a particularly strong commitment-related factor—teacher relationships—and I decided to narrow my final analysis to focus keenly on this factor. In addition, teachers often raised school and district policies and practices in their initial interviews as sources of stress or, at minimum, change that affected their work with children, their satisfaction in the profession, or other matters of importance to them at Old Town Elementary. Besides centering the follow-up interview

on confirming and further exploring relationships, I also solicited teachers' perspectives on the interaction between relationships and change (see Follow-up Interview Guide in Appendix).

Finally, the principal of Old Town was interviewed, primarily as another check on my understanding of certain major events, school-wide programs, and organizational procedures described in teacher data. I also was interested to hear her responses to some of the same questions asked of teachers in their two interviews (see Principal Interview Guide in Appendix).

Safeguards for Participants, Artifacts, and Data

I have ensured customary safeguards for participants, artifacts not in the public domain, and all forms of data. The large number of high-poverty schools in the participating metropolitan-area school district and the equally large number of teachers in those schools provide study participants a high degree of confidentiality. The identities of participants are protected in this report through the use of aliases for all teachers referred to by name. Except for a master copy of each interview, electronic and paper forms of interview transcripts also were made anonymous through the use of codes in place of participant names.

Upon agreement to participate, each teacher received a copy of the signed consent form. I maintained all original signed consent forms. With permission of the participants, interviews were tape-recorded. I also took hand-written field notes during the interviews. Interview tapes were transcribed to create a word-processed report of each interview.

The confidentiality of all artifacts and forms of data are and will continue to be maintained in a secure location. These materials include: (a) photographs and field notes collected through observation and document review; (b) interview data tapes, electronic

and paper forms of transcripts, and handwritten notes taken during interviews; and (c) other electronic and handwritten reflections, report outlines, diagrams, and mutterings.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

> Data analysis is a systematic search for meaning. It is a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to others. . . . Researchers always engage their own intellectual capacities to make sense of qualitative data. . . . only the intelligence, creativity, and reflexivity of the human mind can bring meaning to those data (Hatch, 2002, p. 148).

Data analysis and interpretation were conducted over an 18-month period. Although not by design, this prolonged period allowed me to spend a considerable amount of time in informal analysis before entering the more formal, systematic process described by Hatch (2002). At that point, I did not choose to take a highly structured approach to analysis, such as prescribed in the methods developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998), Miles and Huberman (1994), or even Lincoln and Guba (1985). Instead, I drew upon a variety of inductive techniques, as described by Hatch (2002), to systematically frame and analyze data from the first set of interviews. Results of this work are reported in Chapter 4 to answer the research questions, "What does 'commitment' mean to teachers?" and "What factors appear to affect teacher commitment?"

To analyze data from follow-up interviews, I took a less structured and more interpretive approach to make sense of why and how teachers' relationships appear to be a particularly important factor that influences their organizational commitment. Again, given the application of a constructivist perspective in this study, I viewed the work of analysis as Scheurich (1997) proposes:

> not the development of an accurate representation of the data, as the positivist approach assumes, but a creative interaction between the conscious/unconscious researcher and the decontextualized data which is assumed to represent reality or, at least, reality as interpreted by the interviewee (p. 63).

Results of this sense-making effort are woven into Chapter 5, where teacher commitment is examined as a concept and a reality that has special implications for the functioning of high-poverty school organizations.

First Round Interview Analysis

Prior to beginning formal analysis of first round data, I had undertaken a variety of informal analyses. I listened to each interview tape at least once, to get each teacher's "story" in my mind and remember the context within which we had our interview (place, day, time). After all interviews were transcribed, I created a hard copy printout of each and began to read through the transcripts. In these readings, I added margin notes as a way to experiment with rough open coding and see what emerged. Among the first two or three, I saw that teachers' comments could be viewed as reflecting one of two directions: *outward perceptions*, as they talked about what they see, do, and think in relation to other people and *inward perceptions*, as they talked about how those experiences affected them (emotional reactions, decisions, and self-reflections). Thinking these two categories might be useful organizers for a systematic reading of all the data, I read through some or all of six interviews—making margin notes on the transcripts regarding these "perceptions of others" and "perceptions of influences on self." Although this simple taxonomy proved not to be useful, the margin notes illustrate the array of perceptions teachers readily shared during these interactions (see Initial Open Coding of First Round Interviews in Appendix).

I shifted focus at that time, to verify the accuracy of the transcripts (which were produced by someone else) by comparing them to audiotapes and hand-correcting the hard copies. This allowed me to hear and see the data one more time, before beginning formal analysis. After transferring all transcript corrections to their respective electronic files, I considered again an option for initially sorting and grouping the data from 17

interviews. When printed out in single-space format, the interviews produced over 170 pages of narrative data. To begin to delve into the data in a still-organized but less broad manner, I chose to systematically group perceptions shared by informants within the five major topic areas that framed the interviews. This technique, termed "framing" of the analysis by Hatch (2002, pp. 162-164), allowed me to break the data down into more manageable categories that held initial meaning in the study (e.g., Professional Commitment) and then seek an overall sense of differences and similarities in my conversations with teachers on each category topic.

As noted above, the topics framing the interview were not addressed in the same order in practice. Moreover, because the questions were broad, topics were often revisited during an interview. For the purpose of sorting interview text in this framing exercise, I created a set of shorthand phrases to represent each of the five topics. The following list shows each phrase and the interview guide question(s) with which it is associated (see First Round Interview Guide in Appendix):

- Background – (Question [Q] 1) Please tell me how you became a teacher. (Q4) How did you come to teach at Old Town Elementary School?
- Professional commitment – (Q2) Why do you continue to teach?
- Change – (Q3) How has teaching changed over time for you?
- Organizational commitment – (Q5) What keeps you here [or] what prompted you to leave?
- Future – (Q6) What do you see yourself doing in 5 years?
- Recommendations – Interview text in which the teacher recommended one or more colleagues as potential study participants

After hand-coding all transcripts according to these six topics, I added the six open codes as sub-headers in the electronic file of each transcript and was able to create

and print out a “report” across all interviewees on each topic. As was expected, there were many situations in which the content of an interviewee’s comments addressed more than one topic. For example, a teacher’s narrative on how the requirements of increased student testing in recent years have caused her to give up teaching students certain things she believes are important was coded as both Change and Professional Commitment, and the data excerpt appears in both of those data reports. In addition, there were sometimes entire sections of an interview that provided teacher perceptions regarding issues that appeared to be peripheral to the questions at hand, so I created and used a seventh category entitled Other to cluster these data together for later examination.

The final discrete step taken in my analysis of first round interview data was to systematically read through data in each of the topic-specific reports. Data from some are used primarily in descriptive sections of Chapter 4 (Research Findings). For example, in combination with the unobtrusive data collected at the onset of the study (AEIS data, district data, campus improvement plan, photographs), the Background set of interview data informed the current chapter (Methodology). Data from the two topics explicitly associated with teacher commitment were then read, coded, and reread to identify major themes across all interviewees that, to my mind, offered some understanding of how teachers define commitment and how commitment seems to interact with the school organization(s) in which they worked.

Professional Commitment

Through analysis of data categorized as Professional Commitment, I identified and named five domains of teacher experience that appear to be common to study participants and include data describing how they define commitment, what commitment "looks" like from their perspectives, and what factors are associated with their commitments to the teaching profession: (a) affective motivation, (b) practical

motivation, (c) identification with students, (d) ideological goals for students, and (e) commitment action. Four other domains seemed relevant to teacher commitment but descriptive more of the context within which they currently experience and view professional commitment: (a) high versus low poverty schools, (b) novice versus experienced teachers, (c) policy and practice, and (d) teaching preferences.

Data from the first set of domains are discussed in detail in Chapter 4. I did not further analyze data in the second set, but drew on teachers' comments in the discussion of organizational commitment in Chapter 4 and in Chapter 5 (Interpretations and Implications for Administrative Practice, Education Policy, and Research).

Organizational Commitment

Analysis of data categorized as Organizational Commitment yielded nine themes that seem directly associated with teacher commitment to their school organizations: (a) personal relationships, (b) shared values, (c) learning, (d) cooperation, (e) help, (f) appreciation, (g) empowerment, (h) discipline, and (i) power struggle. In coding these data, I resisted the temptation to create people-based domains (i.e., principal, colleagues, students, parents), but six of the nine themes are closely connected to certain people. Teachers talked about cooperation and help as important experiences with other teachers and staff; they talked about appreciation, empowerment, discipline, and power struggle in relation, primarily, to their experiences with administrators.

Follow-up Interview Analyses

As noted earlier in this chapter, I developed the follow-up interview guide to accomplish two goals: (a) to solicit confirmation (or disconfirmation) of my analysis of first round interviews from a sub-set of study participants, and (b) to probe teachers'

definitions and perceptions of the particular finding that relationships are a key factor in their commitment to stay at, or to have left, Old Town Elementary School.

Interestingly, before I raised the topic of relationships in the follow-up interview, teachers (and the school principal, as well) often highlighted the importance of relationships when responding to an introductory question (see Question 1 in Follow-up Interview Guide and Question 2 in Principal Interview Guide in the Appendix). When asked directly about their perspectives on relationships as a key finding of my research, teachers provided rich examples of the meanings they ascribe to their own personal relationships with others in the school community.

I took a much more interpretive approach to analyzing these data. Through iterative readings of the full transcripts, a review of unobtrusive data (particularly the Old Town campus improvement plan and web-published district documents), and an informal revisiting of data from the first round of interviews, I became more convinced of the importance of relationships to the commitment of teachers to high-poverty schools. After reading the data for a "sense of the whole" (Hatch, 2002, p. 181), I recorded impressions that seemed most salient to interpreting teachers' answers to the now-narrower version of this study's second research question, "How are teachers' relationships an important factor affecting their commitment to working in a high-poverty school?" An interpretation of these data is presented in Chapter 5.

I certainly do not claim that teachers' relationships are the "key" to understanding and influencing teacher commitment in high-poverty schools. Qualitative data from a small sample of teachers in a single district can, however, lead to the development of well-grounded “particularizations” (Patton, 1990, p. 487). In contrast to “generalization,” particularization takes into consideration the time- and place-bound nature of human behavior. At minimum, particularizations represent working hypotheses for future inquiry

among different teachers in similar school and district settings. Moreover, I believe the implications of these results, as discussed in Chapter 5, may warrant consideration by educators in the field who seek promising, empirically-based ideas for harnessing the professional commitment of teachers and encouraging their organizational commitment to schools that serve high-poverty children and youth.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

INTRODUCTION

As stated early in this report, the constructivist lens through which I chose to explore the phenomenon of teacher commitment recognizes that teachers understand their profession and the schools in which they teach from their respective vantage points. Into my conversations with each of them, I brought my own unique set of experiences and perspectives. Findings from this study of 17 teachers who work, or once worked, in a particular high-poverty school do not represent generalizable truths about why some teachers stay in high-poverty schools and why others leave. Data and analyses are the results of my face-to-face interactions with teachers and my subsequent interpretation of the experiences, emotions, and opinions expressed in these conversations.

Through the detailed description of study participants' words and the context within which those behaviors occurred, plausible explanations for individual and social behavior can be identified and further explored. Speculations about patterns observed across research participants can inform practical recommendations for action as well as hypotheses for future research. Based on these assumptions, I view the following analyses as offering "perspective rather than truth … and context-bound extrapolations rather than generalizations" (Patton, 1990, p. 491).

ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Old Town Elementary School serves children who live in small houses and duplexes in the immediate neighborhood or in apartments in a nearby subsidized housing project. Surrounded on two sides by residential streets and on the other two sides by a busy highway and businesses serving the greater community, the school would be a

familiar sight in many central city neighborhoods of this urban district. Its red brick exterior is typical of schools built in the late 1950s. Sidewalks meander to the west and south, linking school entrances to a parking lot and a large cluster of portables, housing two classrooms each. The portables dominate the grounds to the south of the main building, but the east side is reserved for swings, jungle gyms, and other equipment for students at recess.

As you walk through the main entrance, the door to the school office is to the left and the teacher's lounge is to the right. A large bulletin board illustrates the school's recycling results for August through March: ?Cuanto hemos ahorrado? (How much have we saved?) Colorful pictographs display savings in terms of gallons of oil, gallons of water, numbers of trees, and "space for one butterfly garden"—the last of which is a school-wide goal toward which students and teachers are working. Poetry, essays, and other student work appear outside every teacher's door and highlight the dominance of the Spanish language among students and parents. Other hallway displays announcing school-wide activities and classroom study topics appear, also, in both English and Spanish.

Two expansive murals, hand-painted on hallway walls, depict children with black, brown, and white faces—some in multi-colored traditional dress and others in the familiar shorts, pants, and shirts of today's elementary-age students. The percentage of Old Town students from Hispanic backgrounds has been steadily rising, increasing by about 17 percentage points between 1994 and 2002. Although the proportions of African American and White students declined by 7 to 8 percentage points each during that time period, the student population remains somewhat more diverse than most similar schools in the district. Teachers also report a new diversity within the Hispanic student population itself. A teacher who taught a predominantly Mexican student population during her 16

years in El Paso says, “You always think [the students here are] from Mexico, but they come from Central America, from South America. . . . It’s really been very interesting to have so many different children from many different countries.”

A Family and a Community

> [Old Town has] always felt like a family environment where people can always depend on each other. Everybody is so supportive. And it doesn’t matter what grade level you’re at either. It’s just everybody helping everybody out around here.
>
> I would say building a sense of community, a sense of family, is a big priority here at Old Town Elementary School. Not only with the staff but within the classroom.

Old Town teachers who were interviewed in spring 2004 were asked, “How would you describe Old Town Elementary School to a teacher who has never been here or heard about it? What makes Old Town the school that it is?” As illustrated above, teachers most commonly described the school as a family or community. Although it is not unusual to encounter these metaphors when elementary teachers talk about their schools, it also is not necessarily a widespread perception. One of the former Old Town teachers, who has taught at a number of different schools in and outside the district, calls Old Town faculty an “extended family” of current and former teachers who continue to get together for dinners, birthday celebrations, and baby showers. The Old Town “family” contrasts sharply with the teacher’s first year experience at another high-poverty school, when he was hired after the school year started and:

> The teachers gave me five kids from each classroom to make up my classroom. But they gave me whatever they wanted. And it was a very bad experience because the teachers were very much to themselves, they weren’t really team players, they had a lot more years of experience, and I guess they just figured I could figure it out on my own.

In comparing his Old Town colleagues to the faculty of still another school where he had taught for two years, the same teacher says:

> There seemed to be that connection [at Old Town], that drive about wanting to make it the best school . . . It seemed at the other school I was at before, they seemed committed but everybody just sort of went along for the ride. There wasn't really anything innovative going on. There wasn't a lot of teacher interest in what's in it for the kids. It seemed like everyone did their own thing.

A pre-kindergarten teacher who had worked as a substitute at a number of schools in the district, including Old Town, before gaining a full-time position at the school, offers the following comparison:

> Every school has its own culture. Being a substitute teacher, I've really seen that. Old Town is such a comfortable setting. When I first came in here it was just so easy to just talk to the faculty. I just felt really comfortable. But, I went to [another school in the district] one time . . . and it was such a cold atmosphere. Ah, cold! Nobody was very welcoming.

High Expectations

Hallway walls are decorated not only with student work but also with announcements of accomplishments by teachers and students, framed custodial safety awards, and numerous posters offering words of encouragement, such as "Excelencia! Comienza contigo" (Excellence! It begins with you.) and "Believe in Yourself." Inside the cafeteria, a banner stretches from floor to ceiling, urging students to "Think Straight A's—Attendance, Attitude, Achievement!" Declaring high expectations for "all children" also is not unusual in this day and age—particularly given the high-stakes accountability environment surrounding the public schools. Old Town is one of a handful of high-poverty elementary schools in the district, however, that has consistently received a state accountability rating of *Academically Acceptable* or higher. After a history of steadily increasing passing rates by nearly all major student groups enrolled (African American, Hispanic, White, and economically disadvantaged), the school was recognized in the mid-1990s with the U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon School award. After 1999, Old Town experienced a roller coaster ride of declines and recoveries until it

achieved a state rating of *Recognized* in 2001-2002. These school-wide academic achievements are celebrated every time someone calls out the school's motto[2]: 'Old Town School, where learning is cool!!' When I ask a teacher if the motto originated with her, she replies:

> It was already here but they weren't using it. I felt like every time that someone would say, 'where do you work?' [I'd say] 'I work at [Old Town School, where learning is cool!]' We instill that in the children and I think we tell them we have high expectations because this is the best school in town. That means your behavior has to be good, that means you have to work, and I feel like we all have high expectations.

These words may be directed toward Old Town's parent community, as well. The PTA board displays announcements in English and in Spanish about child care, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) objectives students are expected to master, and registration for parent ESL classes. One of the longest tenured teachers at Old Town says:

> I talk to the parents also and tell them, 'You need to focus on that—education, higher education for the children. They can do it, they sure can do it. You just have to help them. . . . And a lot of my parents are very young, so I tell them, 'You know, there's classes at night for you to learn English also.'"

Teacher and Administrator Turnover

In the teachers' lounge, an array of equipment lines the walls—a copier, a laminator, soda and snack machines, a big refrigerator, and a matrix of teacher mailboxes. Teachers come here during their planning and preparation period to work on materials for the next day's lessons, and some gather at the long rectangular table for lunch. Old Town has a somewhat more diverse teaching faculty than similar schools in the district, in terms of teacher ethnicity and/or professional experience. In 2001-02, over 45 percent of Old Town teachers were Hispanic. This is an unusually high proportion of the faculty compared to other elementary schools in the district, where student

[2] Just as a pseudonym is used in this report to protect the identity of the school, this motto was created to communicate approximately the same meaning as the school's actual motto.

populations that are majority non-white are taught by teaching faculties that are majority white.

Although longitudinal teacher turnover data was not available from the district, the rate of teacher resignations at Old Town the previous year (2000-01) was somewhat lower than the district average and the rate of transfers was somewhat higher. Nonetheless, most of my interviewees who talked about teacher turnover perceive the teaching faculty as relatively stable. One long-tenured teacher says, “Even though we've had different principals, the staff has still stayed the same; there hasn't been that big of a turnover.” This differs considerably from the observation of a former teacher: “during the ten years that I was there, I could easily name three different faculties.” Even this teacher, though, added that “There was always that core group that kind of held things together."

All interviewees who talk about administrative turnover agree that Old Town has experienced nearly annual changes in school administration in the recent past. The sixth grade teacher says, “I’ve been through, one, two, three, four principals in ten years.” Another teacher describes the school’s history as follows:

> Every two years there's been a different principal. But yet, the staff has stayed the same. So [this] tells me that the staff is very committed to the school—that principals can go and come, but somehow this community is important to them and staff stays together.

A third teacher sees a connection between principal and teacher turnover. She observes, “If it’s not a life change [i.e., teacher transfer], it’s usually administration. I mean, that’s what I’ve noticed. Our last principal and our current principal, people have had issues with both of them, and so they decide that they don’t want to work for them anymore, so they go to somewhere else.”

PROFESSIONAL COMMITMENT

Commitment to a profession is not inborn, and its impetus often is remembered by the individual. Each participant in this study of teacher commitment has a unique story regarding the circumstances that brought her or him to the teaching profession. Six participants come from families of teachers or had an influential teacher as a child, another five found their interest in education piqued while pursuing other academic majors in college, and three encountered the interest or an opportunity to teach in a previous job position.

Only one teacher said she had "always wanted to teach," while four teachers appeared to have fallen into (or "fallen back on") the profession. Two of these initially resisted the idea of teaching—one because she viewed teaching as a "pink collar" job and the other because her own learning experiences in public schools had been uncomfortable and difficult. The other two were (and are) musicians and initially entered teaching through substituting, as a way to pay the bills.

Rewards of the Profession

Regardless of their differing avenues into the profession, most of the teachers I interviewed express a desire to nurture children and see students make progress toward social and academic success. A few others clearly thrive on the energizing experience of engaging children in learning:

> Their energy! Their energy! Their energy is just, they have such high energy. . . . when they're excited, that energy is electrifying. And, you know, you feed off of that.

Intrinsic Rewards

These motivations to teach echo the research that claims teachers are motivated by the intrinsic rewards of teaching children (Green & Manke, 2001; Joseph, 2001;

Somech & Bogler, 2002). Most of my study participants appear to be motivated by what I will term affective benefits gained from the experience of teaching. Many explicitly express their satisfaction with "making a difference" for students, and they seem to define this similarly: their positive influence on student growth and achievement is what most mean by "making a difference."

Teachers don't necessarily look for the same indications they have made a difference for students, however. While most look, of course, for immediate evidence of academic progress, a number of teachers look for indications that their students (and sometimes students' parents) depend on them for help in times of crisis. For example, after running away from an out-of-home placement by Child Protective Services, a former student came to one of the teachers for refuge. Another teacher was gratified to help a frightened parent who turned to her when a neighbor was threatening, "I'm gonna have you deported." She was able to refer the woman for legal help from a nearby free clinic. Finally, teachers with many years of experience also measure their impact on students in the long-term, when they talk about former students recognizing and thanking them many years after they have graduated from school:

> I've run into my kids at, one of them was at Auto Zone and then another one I ran into was at the place right there next to HEB. And they come up, "you were my teacher." And when I've been invited to their graduations, or when they have their first baby. How many jobs do you have they come back and they say, or even when you have parents that tell you, "you made a difference in my life"?

Extrinsic Benefits

Only one teacher indicates she has remained in the teaching profession for what might be called the extrinsic or material benefits of teaching as well as for more intrinsic rewards. In response to the question, "Why do you continue to teach?" an older teacher with 30 years of professional teaching experience says, "One's money, financial

reasons." Since she became the sole support of her children about 15 years ago, it seems she has never considered changing careers to be a feasible option. Her perspective is consistent with the theory that, "as time goes on, teachers' investments (and personal sacrifices) increase, and the attractiveness to join other schools or occupations declines" (Reyes, p. 150). The only other long-tenured teacher who discusses salary volunteers she is discouraged by the absence of pay increases, but finds that intrinsic rewards somehow compensate:

> I have taxes to pay, I have bills to pay, and I would like to send my son to college and I would like to travel. And then you see all these people who are making more money than you are, and they're younger than you, and they're in jobs that may or may not have been college jobs. I feel that somewhere along the way there is no balance, but then you have to see what it is you have been successful with.

Younger teachers, on the other hand, unselfconsciously discuss salary as a potential constraint to remaining committed to the profession. In reflecting on how she had managed to work through the stresses of her first two years, a former Old Town teacher who completed her fifth year in 2003-04 says, "I never really thought of quitting that much, except for times when I didn't have any money. . . . I had done all of this and I was still living hand to mouth. I was never able to do things with some of my other friends that had other professions." When I ask another novice if she thinks she might see the rewards for teaching changing over time, she shares the following:

> I can. I think about it all the time because, at the moment, I'm not married but probably will be within the next year and a half. And I look into the future and think about wanting to get married and have a family. . . . And I can see getting very frustrated not having, not feeling like I get paid [enough], because I already get frustrated with pay. . . . Having to support a family, or help support a family, I can see me saying 'there's got to be something else out there that pays more.'

These young teachers' concerns are consistent with what Johnson and Birkland (2002) report from their research on new teachers' career decisions. Unlike teachers in past generations, teachers new to the profession today place compensation as one of the

three top factors of concern to them. Although compensation to the informants in this Massachusetts study involves "professional status" in the eyes of the public as well as tangible salary, this issue matches in importance those of student success and professional learning and growth.

Beyond the issue of salary, the other extrinsic benefits of teaching are related more to teachers' commitments to remain with a particular school organization. These benefits are discussed later in the chapter.

Making a Difference

As I listened to tapes of my interviews with teachers, and then examined the transcript excerpts describing what their profession means to them, two aspects of their desire to "make a difference" stood out. One might be viewed as the *source* of their desire to have an impact on students—where it is coming from. I view the other aspect as the *focus*, or purpose, of their desire—where it is going.

Identifying with Students

Many teachers in the study, in one way or another, say that they identify with the students attending schools similar to Old Town Elementary School. That is to say, they are not simply *familiar* with students' economic circumstances, or *know* about the learning challenges some face, or even *understand* students' culture or language. Rather, the teachers *identify* with the students because they, themselves:

- have lived in a household with serious economic problems;
- are bilingual and/or were limited English speaking as children;
- have a similar cultural background (Hispanic, specifically); and/or
- have family members suffering alcohol, drug, or legal trouble;

- have had direct experience with learning difficulties, either their own or those of family members.

Teachers were not, of course, directly asked "do you identify with your students?" Their connections with students emerged as they shared their personal situations in response to a question or probe regarding why they continue to teach or how they decided to work at Old Town:

> (Question to teacher #1): Tell me a little bit more, then, about why you continue to teach.
> (Response from teacher #1): I feel like I can connect with them because of my experiences … I guess being a Hispanic myself, although I didn't grow up the way that they grow up, you know. … I've always had a strong, I guess, connection to the Hispanic culture because of my parents and my grandparents and so I wanted to make a difference with them, once I decided to become a teacher.

> (Question to teacher #2): What sort of factors did you take into consideration when you said 'this is where I want to work'?
> (Response from teacher #2): I feel that I can do a lot for these children and the parents too. They need to have somebody that can communicate with them and can encourage them and tell them, 'look, I did it and I didn't know how to speak English either.' My parents didn't speak English at the time either, none of us did. I was the oldest of the family. The only one that knew how to speak English when we started school was my younger brother.

As the above comments illustrate, a shared language and/or cultural background is the source of many Old Town teachers' identification with students. These teachers express empathy for the challenges facing their non-English speaking students, who need to build academic knowledge through their native language while learning English as a foreign language. Some students enter school with limited language skills in their native language, as well. Other students bring to the classroom understandings of the world that can be unexpected, even to teachers who are confident of their own cultural knowledge. A veteran bilingual teacher remembers:

> One time I was teaching a lesson on cups and spoons and I was like . . . 'What are measuring utensils?' And then I thought to myself, 'Hello, my mother never used

> measuring cups.' When we make tortillas, it was just estimating. When you make rice and everything, we don't measure everything.

Among the Old Town teachers who talk about cultural connections with the largely Hispanic parent population, most paint a picture similar to that described by a young male bilingual teacher:

> Our parents are very quiet. Our parents go on the philosophy of, 'whatever you say goes, you're the teacher.' It's a respect issue. So among the bilingual parents it's kind of like 'what you say is right and that's that.' Obviously you have some parents that do express some concern sometimes, but usually in general, it's more like, 'Si, maestro. Yes teacher, whatever you say. Do it.

Although teachers familiar with this traditional perception of parent and teacher roles empathize with parents who are reluctant to get more involved in their children's education, most study participants expressed concern that this tradition does not serve students well in U.S. schools.

The ability to identify with students on an economic basis crosses language and cultural lines. Experiences with poverty and the family problems that often result cause both Hispanic and white teachers at Old Town to express open concern for the many students who are "carrying a lot, a lot on their shoulders, as far as any kind of pain that they've had at home, [and] when they come to school they're expected to perform and they might not have eaten."

The sources of teachers' identification with students were revealed, sometimes, when they told stories about working with their students. A teacher whose father has been in prison for nearly 15 years recounts, "My kids know that my dad's in prison. We wrote memoirs, so I wrote one about my dad because I want them to know that where I come from, that it's not easy. It's never really been truly easy." Another teacher whose former husband was an alcoholic describes how she introduces the drug and alcohol abuse unit she teaches every year:

> I'll say, 'Have you ever come home and when you get close to the house you get this sick feeling in the bottom of your stomach and you don't know whether you want to go in or not. And then when you go in sometimes, they're not always pleasant inside. They're grouchy or not feeling well or sleeping a lot or whatever.' Then I say, 'You know, that's what my house was like.' So it just opens a whole can of worms and everybody wants to tell their story. Because the children that are in that life, they [generally] want to hide it.

Some Old Town interviewees whose personal histories do not intersect with their students' cultural, language, or economic experiences (primarily white, middle class females) articulate identification with children who have learning differences or difficulties. A long-tenured white teacher who struggled with reading in public school says, "I always struggled with it, even in college. I was sitting in another room reading out loud to myself so I'd comprehend it well." In responding to a question about the kind of relationships she had had at Old Town that "worked or didn't work,'" a young former teacher replies, "I had a very good relationship with all the special ed[ucation] teachers. My sister, she was handicapped growing up. So we kind of grew up more open-minded to any handicapped children and special ed[ucation]. I mean, I knew all about that." To a young Hispanic teacher, helping students overcome learning difficulties is a major motivation behind her commitment to the profession:

> I had trouble reading and . . . in math and just in anything in general in school. . . . Knowing how it felt to be behind or not understand something, I want to help … knowing how hard it is for kids sometimes, maybe being picked on or just knowing the feeling of not being able to do something like the other children. So, I just, I want … the satisfaction I get from somebody progressing.

Effecting Educational and Social Change

The second aspect of teachers' expressed desire to "make a difference," which stands out in interviews with Old Town teachers, has a different feel. A number of respondents clearly voice goals that must be seen as ideological in nature. Some of their goals are directly associated with having an educational impact on students and, in some

cases, parents in the school community, while others focus on the economic and/or social conditions of Old Town students and families. In both cases, though, teachers' goals are change-oriented. As one young teacher simply put it, "I like being able to achieve and succeed in a place where it hasn't happened before."

First, as noted earlier in this chapter, Old Town teachers encourage students and their parents to have high expectations, including the explicit goal of *continuing education beyond high school*. A number of Old Town teachers say they actively encourage their students to aspire to college or other post-secondary education:

> They [students] need to know that they can get out of this position that they're in. They need to know that they have a chance to make it. . . . I start them now by telling them that they can be successful and they can get scholarships, they can get loans, they can make it there.

Texas Hispanic youth have a lower rate of participation in college entrance examinations (46%) than do African American (60%), Asian (79%), and white (66%) students (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2004). This same pattern is seen in the rates at which Texas student groups apply for college: only 30 percent of Hispanic seniors had applied to four-year colleges by spring of 2002 compared to 40 percent of African American, 60 percent of Asian, and 46 percent of white seniors (Tienda, Cortes, & Niu, 2003). Given the fact that 42 percent of Texas public school students in 2001-02 were Hispanic and over 50 percent of students were economically-disadvantaged, it can be assumed that a large percentage of the latter also do not set their sights on attending college.

Most fifth graders in the district attend middle schools as sixth graders, including all from Old Town who are not admitted to the single sixth grade classroom that is offered through a special science program sponsored by the district. The sixth grade

teacher is proud of the program for its impact not only on students' science knowledge but also on the broader educational change it has initiated:

> Before we had the Young Scientists [program], I believe that, at the most, there might have been two kids from this school who have ever gone to [the district's magnet junior high school]. And the only reason those two kids went was because they were kids of teachers from this school. . . . The community just either, one, wasn't aware of it or, two, maybe were a little scared of it or just didn't know what all was involved with it. This opened up a bunch of doors for these kids . . . I think this is the first year that I've got kids that have gone all the way up to [the magnet high school].

A number of the Old Town teachers interviewed in this study also refer to free after-school classes for students, sponsored through a collaborative program coordinated by the district. Although teachers are most directly involved in the academic end of the program (tutoring), they laud the art and music classes, sports, computer courses, and other activities as efforts to *enrich students' life experiences*. In talking about the program, one teacher referred to it as an opportunity to "build their [students'] self-esteem [and their need] to be successful in something." The goal of enriching students' life experiences is explicit in a Hispanic teacher's account of how she works toward this goal in the course of her day-to-day teaching. As a child growing up in a military family, she had lived in Europe as well as a number of cities in the U.S.:

> They [my students] always want to hear me talk about where I've lived and what kinds of things that I've done so that they can see beyond what's available just right here for them. . . . I think that my experiences, having grown up the way that I did, that are very different from the way that they're growing up now . . . having seen places and seen what kinds of opportunities there are out in the world, I think that makes a difference.

A third education-related goal Old Town teachers seem to possess is to *educate parents* in the school community. A number of interviewees teach English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in the evenings at Old Town or other schools in the district. Other study participants conduct parent workshops on special topics, such as how to use

reading strategies at home and how to help your child with homework. A teacher who has taught ESL classes for at least 20 years says bluntly, “If we do not educate the adults, it’s not a win-win situation.” This teacher appears to view her involvement in parent education as having multiple purposes, all directly or indirectly connected to Old Town students’ needs to have parental support beyond what the teachers provide. For example, she talks about using the ESL class she teaches to promote networking among parents: “I tell my ESL students, ‘I’m telling you what is going on in the lower level, the elementary level, so we can network and you can tell your friends, and you can tell your neighbors.”

The social goals expressed by respondents, in large part, intersect with and expand the educational goals they articulate for Old Town students and parents. When a young male teacher tells his students about his father’s incarceration (as mentioned earlier in this chapter), he goes on to suggest that his purpose in doing so is to *inspire students to overcome adversity*: “You’re going to run into some tough spots, but it’s how you deal with it. What decisions you make and where you come out. I want to be able to share that not only with them but with everybody.” A long-tenured teacher who formerly worked at the school talks about her approach to helping students deal with the personal and social challenges they face:

> [I’m] just being honest with them, telling them ‘this is life over here. You’re going to have to get from here to here. . . . I am not preparing you for next year. I am preparing you for the rest of your life. What I try to teach you now, I hope you will remember when you’re my age.’

A second ideological goal expressed by some respondents is described explicitly by a long-time teacher on the Old Town faculty as the intent to *empower students*. She talks passionately about the school’s conscious efforts to give older students, in particular, opportunities for leadership among peers and with younger students. Examples of these opportunities include a leadership camp for fifth graders and, in the spring of

each school year, a special role for upper elementary students in the school's annual Super Kids' Day. This latter event, coordinated by the physical education teacher, has long placed fifth graders in charge of activities for the primary grade students, as an exercise in leadership. Finally, some Old Town faculty help with a summer youth program, sponsored by a local community-building organization, in which junior high students learn to recognize their experiences and accomplishments as strengths they can articulate in employment interviews. Old Town graduates participating in the youth employment training program can say:

> 'I've been a leader at my school, I've gone to the leadership camp, I've run the Super Kid's Day, I've done fund-raisers.' I feel this school is training them. If the parents don't know how, at least these children are being empowered to be leaders somewhere along the way.

Among some Old Town teachers, the ultimate goal is for low-income students to actively consider occupations they might typically think are out of reach. The sixth grade teacher, for example, *encourages students' professional ambitions* as they think toward higher education and beyond: "they can't wait to become that lawyer they want to be or the doctor or the geologist or whatever the field happens to be that these kids are looking forward to." This same teacher also tries to counter the concern some students may have that they must give up their culture in order to gain upward mobility:

> Because I've seen a lot more, growing up the way that I did . . . [I can communicate to them] how important an education is . . . they don't have to stay within the community, but yet they can still keep their culture and move out.

Building and maintaining cultural pride is a clear goal for this teacher and most of Old Town's Hispanic teachers, in particular. In interviews with long-tenured teachers as well as novices, there appears to be a strong commitment to transitioning students into bilingualism (mastery of English while retaining Spanish) and preparing them for success in mainstream U.S. economy and society. Teachers who talk about the school's

development of its bilingual and ESL programs indicate there are agreed-upon theories and goals underlying the approach being taken by the faculty. Over the last few years, the school has invested in acquiring Spanish language books and other materials to equal the types and quantities available in English—particularly books offering a wide range of reading levels for each age group, to meet the needs of students who are learning in both languages. A number of teachers also describe the variety of cultural activities and celebrations held at Old Town. Because not all Hispanic students have Mexican backgrounds, there seems to be a school-wide effort to broaden the focus of these cultural events. For example, a Latino Festival was established recently to encourage "cultural pride and community bonding" being encouraged at Old Town.

Just as Old Town teachers seem to want to enrich students' life experiences and empower them, they pursue these goals for parents, as well. Beyond encouraging the educational goals of learning English and continuing formal education, some teachers who conduct ESL classes find ways to *broaden parents' life experiences*:

> I get energized knowing that [I'm] opening opportunities for someone that we take for granted. Something as basic as taking them to the mall, going to a bookstore. They're like children that have never seen a bookstore. And when you think about it, well if you live in Mexico and you live out in the country, how many bookstores are out there? Then, you know, Half-Price Books, all the books that are there, the dictionaries, things that they've never seen before. And here they are adults already. I feel like we need somebody to do it. And I do it because I see the need. I also see it because . . . my parents were immigrants.

Commitment in Action

Old Town teachers' commitments to student and family success are evident in their discussion of activities beyond those that are traditionally within the purview of a teacher's responsibilities. Most activities seem to be a direct response to their ideological goals associated with tangible educational and/or social change in the lives of their students. In essence, the activities are commitment in action.

Tutoring students after school and/or on Saturdays, for example, has come to be a standard part of professional life for many Old Town teachers. In some cases, tutoring is paid work through a program sponsored by the district or school administration. For example, teachers receive stipends for providing TAKS tutoring in the after-school program and for participating in a grant-funded reading program for students on Saturdays. In other cases, teacher work outside of school hours is initiated by teachers themselves, who see an unmet need. A teacher concerned about the development of some of her pre-kindergarteners told me:

> I went up to the principal, and I asked 'I'd like to tutor the kids for free. Can I do that?' (because I have to ask permission). 'Well, no, we don't want you to do it for free; why don't you do a Saturday school? We'll pay you,' [she said]. And I thought, 'Well, great, that's even better.

Teaching for special purposes and for additional pay is not unusual among teachers; indeed, it may be increasingly common at many elementary schools in Texas. As a former Old Town teacher said, "Usually in the spring it's for third, fourth, and fifth graders; the ones taking the [TAKS] tests that count." Occasional, informal tutoring after-school for children who need one-on-one help also has long been an accepted part of many public school teachers' professional work days. Other efforts described by Old Town teachers, however, may be unique to schools serving students from high-poverty backgrounds.

For example, more than one study participant indicated the importance of offering extended hours and more days for conferences with their students' parents, some of whom have work conflicts and/or transportation barriers to attending meetings at the school during week days and early evenings. As one teacher says, "I don't leave it [parent-teacher conferencing] to that one day that the district allots. I usually do it the week prior, the week of, and I do it until late." Teachers sometimes find it necessary to

visit students' homes, if meeting at the school proves to be too difficult for a parent. This same teacher compares his experience with Old Town parents with those in other school communities:

> A lot of them work multiple jobs, so they're hardly ever home to see their children, whereas when you get into middle or upper class, these are . . . adults that have education. They work at a very good paying job. . . . And they have a set schedule, whereas with my parents their schedule is never set. Sometimes they don't even work. Sometimes they have a week not working because they [i.e., their employer] didn't have the funds to continue construction. So they have that week off until they get a phone call saying come back to work the next day. So it's very hit and miss with them.

Whether the impetus for a home visit is to make initial contact at the beginning of the year or to discuss a problem at school, teachers tend to talk about these visits as having positive social as well as educational outcomes. One teacher says it is good for him to see students, and students to see him, in a different environment: "I like for them to see that there are two different sets of rules. . . . [For example] you're not going to raise your hand at home to ask permission to go to the restroom." Another teacher reports:

> I feel comfortable with the parents . . . they feel comfortable with me, cause I can have conversations with parents about, oh, I'm not sure, just maybe their childhood or getting to know them. Even having the parents invite you over for dinner or things like that. . . . that gives me an opportunity to get to know them better and get to maybe find out some more about the student.

A number of teachers describe taking action in other ways to meet needs specific to the Old Town student and parent population. It is not unusual, for example, to provide transportation for students from after-school tutoring to their homes, or lend books to students without expecting their return. As noted earlier, a number of teachers conduct ESL classes for parents; others develop and conduct parenting workshops on-site at the school. Finally, teachers appear to take on major roles in school fundraising efforts, to

supplement the efforts of PTA members who have limited time and fund-raising experience.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

The professional commitment described above can be expected to enhance the pedagogical efforts of individual teachers with the students in their classrooms. But the question arises: does this important contribution extend to other students and classrooms in Old Town Elementary School? Furthermore, if a teacher's professional commitment to work with high-poverty students is most strongly related to her/his work directly with students and parents, what makes one high-poverty school any more desirable than another as a place in which to do this work?

In all cases, I directly ask my study participants that very question, in one form or another: "What is it about Old Town Elementary School that keeps you here rather than transferring to another school?" Novice teachers and teachers with many years of experience, alike, offer much the same answer:

> The faculty. . . . some of the people that I started out with are still here. So the faculty really is our support. The faculty is really very supportive. . . . All the newer teachers seem to come to the older teachers that have been here before. So we kind of help each other and we're able to work pretty well and keep the school going. Even at a time when we didn't have a principal for a couple of months, we were able to keep it going. *(Response from teacher with over 30 years experience)*

> This is the fourth principal for me. I believe it's been four. And you know, even though they've come and gone, the teachers . . . you know, you just make connections with those teachers; and I've never felt like we weren't a family, even though we got new leadership. The teachers just, they're there for you. (*Response from teacher with over 10 years experience)*

> The staff. I always tell my husband, over and over again, I love [Old Town]. I love the people I work with. I love my teammates. It really makes it easy to work with the other teachers here on my team. No matter what grade I've been in, third grade, fourth grade, you know, the teachers that are here, I don't know, they tend to really also buy into the whole [Old Town] community and you just, you feel it. *(Response from teacher with 5 years or less experience)*

Although the factors most influential on teachers' *professional commitment* center on students and their families, further data analysis points to factors associated with fellow teachers and other school employees as critical to their *organizational commitment*. I noticed the prominence of within-faculty relationships after the first few interviews, recognized it again in listening to the taped conversations, and the factor remained in the foreground as formal data analysis proceeded.

This is not to say teachers' responses are unanimous in how much, or even if, their relationships with colleagues are important to their organizational commitment. For one long-time teacher who consistently expresses a real passion for working with bilingual students and parents, organizational commitment to Old Town may derive largely from her ability to satisfy her professional commitment at the school. Two other teachers either do not indicate they are positively influenced by Old Town Elementary School teachers or make little reference to colleagues. For example, a teacher who has ambitions for leadership beyond the classroom seems more focused on opportunities given (or denied) her by the school principal. Although she indicates she has some "friends" on staff, her direct references to other teachers and the principal, as well, range from neutral to critical[3]. The interview with a pre-kindergarten teacher is somewhat dominated by a concern about the image he thinks others have of male teachers and, in particular, male teachers of young children. Specifically, he assures me he is not gay and takes care to describe how he avoids all situations in which his behavior with students,

[3] This teacher also seems to exaggerate facts about her accomplishments with students (e.g., TAKS performance) and in the school (money expended on her professional development). I conclude she is a more obvious example of how informants "routinely lie to their anthropologists" (Stoller & Olkes, 1987, as reported in Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). I do think, however, that her interviews provide information useful to the analysis of teacher commitment. Exaggeration aside, her comments point to what matters to her as a teacher and a member of the Old Town faculty.

boys or girls, could be questioned. Throughout the interview, he makes little reference to other teachers.[4]

Teachers' perspectives on their relationships with colleagues in general are considered more in Chapter 5, where the importance of relationships with colleagues is discussed as a primary finding of the current research. The remainder of this chapter focuses on describing seven discrete factors that appear to influence teachers' organizational commitment, all of which are functions of their relationships with other teachers and, to a lesser extent, non-teaching staff. Clustered in two categories, these factors, stated simply, include: cooperation, help, backup, learning, shared values, appreciation, and power.

Managing the Work of Teaching

As teachers talk about why they are staying at Old Town (or what they valued about the school when they were on staff), four factors associated with managing the work of teaching deserve examination: *cooperation*, *help*, *backup*, and *learning*. Although I do not suggest the four are solely related to the technical realm of teacher work, each is certainly important to how teachers build, use, and share knowledge and skills within the school.

Cooperation

First, nearly all Old Town teachers—past and present—bring up the importance of cooperation among teachers. Teachers voice the benefits they experience in working with colleagues to, for example, share planning responsibilities by team teaching or create special learning opportunities by pairing primary and upper elementary students as

[4] This teacher is an example of a study participant whose lack of ease in the interview is more transparent than most. The focus in his single interview on concerns less relevant to the study purpose limits the scope and amount of data from him available for analysis. On certain topics, I have no data from him at all. As a result, unlike the teacher previously discussed, his perspectives on teaching in general and on Old Town Elementary School, specifically, are not well represented in my analysis.

"reading buddies." Cooperation also is essential to ensure fundraisers and school-wide instructional programs are successful:

> I feel like every time we've had a fund-raiser, everybody in the staff works. Everybody contributes and there's enough talent that there [are] the people who can organize, the people who can sell, the people who can clean up, the people who can promote, [and] bring in the cultural aspect.

The importance of cooperative relationships is also supported by the comments of teachers who say they do not experience enough of these opportunities to work with others. Although most regular education teachers are able to have daily meetings with team members and participate in cooperative in-class activities, special area and special education teachers have built-in challenges to cooperative work with other adults:

> Some campuses have more inclusion and more partnership, but it's a big complaint among special ed[ucation] and the Early Childhood special ed that we're always isolated. . . . You have to work if you want to work with the regular teachers or [even] the [other] special ed teachers . . . you [have to] make that happen.

More than a few teachers at Old Town also express an unmet school-wide need for cooperation; they say the faculty as a whole needs to work together more often "vertically." That is, teachers need to cooperate across grade levels—particularly between the primary grades (PreK – 2nd grade) and the upper elementary grades (3rd – 6th grades)—to create greater continuity in instruction and build mutual accountability for student performance. An explicit desire is to ensure everyone is doing their share to prepare students for the TAKS tests. In school year 2002-03, the principal evidently often had upper elementary teachers meet about TAKS issues without primary teachers, which caused the former group to feel a greater burden of responsibility and some in the latter group to feel excluded or less important. As one fourth grade teacher puts it:

> We've been asking for vertical team meetings for the last two years and we finally got one, but it wasn't until about a month and a half, two months ago. We needed

> it at the beginning of the year. We can't wait until after the tests. That doesn't do us any good.

Help

A second factor equally valued by teachers in managing their work is, simply, the help available to them from other adults in the school organization. They rely on teaching suggestions, personal advice, and sometimes physical and emotional assistance when tasks are overwhelming. Regardless of experience level, teachers voice their appreciation for instructional and classroom management ideas from colleagues. A special education teacher is grateful for the counselor who schedules, organizes, and leads the many ARD meetings she attends. Another teacher occasionally calls on the counselor for feedback on personal problems:

> I don't know if it is 'confidentiality,' but to know that even the counselor is there for me, if I need it. . . . To know that I can talk to them freely and that they can help advise me on how to handle that situation versus going and putting my head on a chopping block.

Veteran teachers help new teachers answer the never-ending questions, "how do you do this?" and "why are we doing that?" All the teachers remember and are thankful for colleagues who served as models, voluntarily mentored them, or provided support in a particularly difficult year. A teacher who, in her second year at Old Town, was unexpectedly assigned to a much younger grade than she had taught the year before credits her team with helping her manage the stress:

> I had people that I could really lean on when I was having those bad days, you know, the kids coming to school without their work, kids that couldn't read, kids that couldn't write. I think that my team is what got me through that.

Backup

Teachers also depend on what I will call backup as they go about the business of teaching. The backup that teachers describe comes in the form of support from other

adults in the school when they either (a) are faced with a student discipline problem they cannot handle alone, or (b) encounter a conflict between student supervision responsibilities and another need or responsibility.

Relatively few study participants talk directly about problems with student behavior at Old Town Elementary School. The few who do, though, clearly state they expect reliable and consistent assistance from school administrators in this area. As one long-time teacher says:

> I'm much better about disciplining in my own classroom. I'm usually the harder one. . . . Because I rarely ever send a child to the office, if I do, something needs to be done about it when he gets there.

As principals and assistant principals come and go, expectations tend to change regarding when and how administrators will serve as disciplinary backup. Teachers at Old Town seem to fill in the inevitable gap for each other. A male, upper elementary grade teacher readily helps primary teachers who need a time-out spot for students, because "I am strict and also because I am a man. . . . I'm just very no-nonsense and very straight to the point."

Less directly, study participants reveal that student supervision is an ongoing issue teachers often cannot handle alone, even when student behavior itself is not problematic. Teachers at Old Town have come to depend on their grade-level team members, colleagues in neighboring classrooms, and certain non-administrative staff for day-to-day assistance with the management and supervision of students. Teammates check in on each other's students when there is a substitute, and they sometimes combine classrooms to avoid the need for a substitute when a colleague has to be gone part of the day. Teachers particularly appreciate custodians who monitor their classrooms while they "run down the hall" or otherwise have to leave for a few minutes while students are present.

Learning

One final factor important to teachers as they manage the work of teaching is the availability of opportunities at Old Town for their own learning. First and foremost, study participants talk about gaining new ideas from each other. The ongoing sharing of instructional techniques and classroom management strategies is an informal apprenticeship for novice teachers and a comforting source of support for experienced teachers who encounter the unexpected. A former Old Town teacher who has taught for over 20 years still values learning from the "good role models" with whom she has taught:

> We feed off of each other. If they try something and it doesn't work, maybe someone else will try it and see what works. What works for one may not work for others. They may give you an idea that you hadn't even thought of, and so then you try it and then you use it.

A semi-structured mentoring program is in place for new teachers at Old Town. This formalization of teacher-to-teacher learning helps some teachers, while others say they gained as much or more from their supervising teachers (if they student-taught at Old Town), from grade-level team members, or from colleagues who decide to serve as informal mentors:

> One of my teammates . . . immediately took me under her wing as a first year teacher and just was so helpful to me. . . . I did have my own assigned mentor [but she] was the instructional specialist at the time, so I didn't see her too much. I think it really helped to have somebody on my grade level to kind of take me on. . . No one asked her; she just kind of did it. She's just a really great person.

Compared to their on-site learning experiences with colleagues, Old Town teachers are not always enthusiastic when they talk about formal learning opportunities in the form of professional development. One study participant talks about frequent trainings sponsored by the district due to equally frequent changes in curriculum: "things change like three times a year; they're like 'do it this way,' 'now do it this way,' 'now do

it that way.'" Furthermore, some teachers admit that they use new ideas from professional development only if they judge the strategies or materials to be useful, and always in combination with what they are convinced are the "basics of teaching reading and writing [that] don't ever change."

Teachers at Old Town—where student poverty, language needs, and family mobility create particular teaching challenges—indicate they are targeted for more and different kinds of professional development and district oversight than are the faculties of many other schools. A teacher who has been at Old Town for nearly 10 years says:

> I don't think when I was at [another high-poverty school] or even [a wealthy school] we had as much training as we've had since I've been here at Old Town. So everybody is trained for the same thing; everybody is trained in reading, everybody is trained in writing; everybody is trained, even the art, music, and PE teachers.

Another teacher describes the consequences of a "tier system," implemented by the school district in 2003-04, in which schools are rated based on student performance on mid-year benchmark tests. Due to low scores, the instructional program at Old Town Elementary became subject to new requirements and significantly more oversight from district personnel:

> I think tier five is the highest that a school can be, which is very good, and tier one is low. And apparently we were a tier three [at the beginning of the school year] and because of our scores we jumped down to a tier two. And because of that we started, we kind of were put on a plan so to speak by the district. And the district started giving us our lesson plans and kind of telling us what we had to be doing. So that was met with a lot of resistance here at [Old Town]. Because we didn't want to be told what we had to do. . . . They were keeping an eye on us to make sure we were doing it right. We were having to do weekly assessments of the students. The administration would get it and they'd have to pass on that data to the district. . . . We voiced out concerns and then once we really got rolling in the process more concerns came out. Just the fact that there was no flexibility was a . . . I think that was the biggest problem, at least for me.

On the other hand, a fourth grade teacher notes that some of the additional attention received by Old Town was helpful and appreciated. She and her teammates were given "writing workshop days, so we can, you know, get our feet on the ground as far as that goes," and she says the experience gave her more confidence in teaching all the writing that is now required of 4th graders on the state student assessment. Certain district initiatives also bring specialized teachers onto the faculty whose purpose is to help teachers acquire new knowledge and skills. A master reading teacher, for example, is a resource to all teachers as well as coordinator of the mentoring program for novice teachers. Among other things, her job is to facilitate peer observations of classroom teaching—an avenue for learning that some teachers say they enjoy.

Unlike teachers' reactions to most planned professional development, opinions about learning experiences unique to their needs or interests are generally very positive. An early childhood teacher appreciates her monthly meetings with other special education teachers in the district. More than one teacher expresses gratitude toward the principal for providing opportunities to participate in grant writing, look for workshops to meet specific needs, and even attend a national conference.

The four factors just discussed—cooperation, help, backup, and learning—address teachers' needs associated with managing the day-to-day work of teaching. Analysis of data collected from Old Town teachers indicates that the ways in which these commitment factors are (or are not) addressed at the school site influences the commitment they are able to build and maintain toward the school organization.

Certain aspects of the factors are certainly shared by teachers in all schools. For example, all teachers who work in traditionally-organized schools (i.e., self-contained classrooms staffed by solitary teachers) are likely to speak of needs for help and backup similar to those of Old Town teachers. Other aspects of these commitment factors,

however, are directly linked to social and economic characteristics of the Old Town student and parent population. For example, in a second interview with a veteran teacher at the school, she identifies a persistent problem with the computer laboratory as a "real big issue" for most teachers:

> We have a campus technology team, but we're all teachers. And it's kind of been expected of us to go in there and take care of all those computers . . . We don't have time to do that. We have asked very strongly for a couple years for a tech person to be hired, and we've been told that it was not high on the administrator's list of priorities, so it wasn't going to happen. . . . In the classrooms, from what I hear, it's kind of a hit-and-miss type thing. If we have time for it we'll do it. If not that's one of those things that we're pushing aside because we've got to work on these TAKS things. . . . I feel like not only are the students losing out, the teachers are . . . getting further and further behind in their own technology skills.

Opportunities for teachers to receive help in ensuring their students gain technology skills—and opportunities for teachers, themselves, to learn how to integrate technology into their instructional strategies—are directly dependent on tangible organizational resources (time, money, personnel). At Old Town, teachers report that the school's "discretionary" financial resources, which could be used to hire a part-time employee to staff the computer lab, have been dedicated for a number of years to hiring a full-time counselor. Teachers and the principal have decided to make this resource decision because student and related family needs are more than can be met by the half-time counselor allocated to the school in the district budget. Although a common solution to this problem in some schools is for parent volunteers to staff a computer lab and offer technical assistance to teachers, the Old Town parent community has neither the time nor set of skills to do so.

Relating Respectfully

As noted at the first of this chapter section on organizational commitment, the initial round of interviews with study participants clearly point to teachers' relationships

with colleagues as a dominant factor in why they stay at Old Town Elementary School (or, in the case of some former teachers, why they left). A second set of factors embedded in these relationships is associated not with the daily management of teaching and learning but rather with the spirit of the entire educational enterprise. The ongoing development and preservation of *shared values*, the exchange of simple acts of *appreciation*, and the thoughtful exercise of *power* are all associated with relating respectfully to others, which is what I term this second set of factors that influence teachers' organizational commitment.

Shared Values

Teachers' relationships with others in the school are certainly unique from one to the other, but many teachers also talk about certain values or beliefs that connect and hold people together at Old Town. More than one teacher even asserts that, over the years, the school has tended to hire people with "similar philosophies."

Perhaps the most important shared values are those that teachers express regarding student learning opportunities, both academic and non-academic. As noted earlier, the faculty clearly has worked hard to achieve some degree of consensus on how to teach bilingual students and when to transition students into English. This is despite the coming and going of school administrators, and the rise and fall of bilingual education priorities at the district level. It also is clear that teachers value and work hard to ensure that as many Old Town students as possible participate in certain kinds of non-academic activities that are not provided by their parents or readily accessible from organizations other than the school in a low-income neighborhood.

The value that was voiced most frequently by teachers is the belief in high expectations—for students, of course, but also for each other. A number of teachers assert the importance of their shared responsibility for the conduct and well-being of all

students in the school and shared accountability for student performance. A former Old Town teacher of young children remembers that his colleagues there were "expecting you to do your best; if the following year they got one of your kids, they'd ask you, 'what happened with this kid?!'" Another former teacher who had taught at Old Town for 19 years claims that teachers there always "go the extra mile for children."

Not surprisingly, a value for high expectations also can be the focus of some tension among teachers when definitions of high expectations are changing in the social or educational environment. For example, a shifting of expectations regarding how adults relate to children and how teachers relate to students can, and does, catch school faculties in an intergenerational pinch. A young Hispanic teacher describes the habits maintained by a couple veteran Hispanic teachers as:

> very 'old school,' very Latin American old school. Like when an adult walks in, every child has to stand up and say 'good morning, so and so,' and when we leave, they stand up and say 'good morning, so and so.' I mean, that's apparently how my mom and dad were taught.

The continued press for different and/or higher student performance expectations also causes tensions—in this case between teachers at the high stakes grade levels and everyone else. At Old Town, more study participants who teach upper elementary students raise the issue of shared accountability and are more insistent on its importance. In describing a 2003-04 meeting among upper elementary teachers, when they were informed of changes to be made due to the school's decline to "tier two" status, a fourth grade teacher recollects:

> There was some sort of finger pointing in the sense that we have these low scores because things aren't being done in the primary grades. Certain skills are being left out or ignored in the K, first, and second. So when they [students] get to us in third, fourth, and fifth we're having to teach something that should have already been taught and reinforced. . . . You know, you guys [primary grade teachers] do your thematic units and it's nice and you do all these fun projects but you don't

> focus on the skills that need to be taught. And then when they get to us we're stressing out about getting these skills taught.

Finally, a valuing of diversity seems to be shared by many teachers I interviewed. This may seem to be a "given" in terms of students, and Old Town teachers do indeed talk about valuing and celebrating the differences among their students—most of whom are Hispanic but many of whom are from national backgrounds other than Mexico. Somewhat surprising, though, is the recognition and appreciate of diversity among adults in the school, voiced by interviewees. A teacher who left Old Town five years ago but maintains relationships with a number of former colleagues describes the varied interests and abilities they would share at school—from singing on special occasions to excelling at mathematics to being able to "translate anything" from English into Spanish: "Seeing every teacher, they had a particular talent; we admired each other for that." One of the same teachers that talks about shared philosophies among faculty members perhaps unwittingly describes Old Town as a place where similar values have emerged within a diverse community of teachers and staff when she says, "We have so much talent in the school that we don't all have to be the same."

Appreciation

Another aspect of relating respectfully is the literal expression of appreciation for each other. A number of teachers talk about the importance of receiving praise and other explicit evidence that they are valued—particularly by school administrators. One long-time teacher says, "If you are given respect by the place where you're working, then it's easier to stay there. . . . I'm respected for what I do in the classroom." Another is pleased that the principal publicly communicates trust in her by sitting in on a difficult meeting with a parent and saying out loud, "your child is with a really great teacher."

Unfortunately, more often than not, study participants talk about a lack of the appreciation they want so much. No fewer than six individuals in a study of 17 teachers share stories of unmet needs for recognition. Even more importantly, all who perceive disrespect or undervaluation by school administrators describe the experience as significant enough to cause them to consider, or in fact decide, to leave a school.

One novice teacher left Old Town in part because, "I didn't feel that I was given any credit for what things I did do right, and things that I didn't do correctly weren't presented to me in a way that was constructive." At her new school, which serves a high poverty student population in another part of town, she feels "more respected; I feel more like a teacher, I feel more like an educator." A teacher on the Old Town faculty during both years of this study shares in her first interview (2002-03) that she misses the support and praise she had received from a former principal for her leadership in special student programs. The continued absence of administrator recognition, which she reports in her second interview, is one of the main reasons she chooses to leave Old Town after school year 2003-04—despite her enjoyment of students and the good friends she has gained during her five years at the school. Still another teacher, who says she nearly left the previous year due to feeling constantly doubted and unappreciated for what she contributes, was able to remedy the situation by initiating a frank conversation with the principal.

Appreciation seems to play a less obvious but equally important role in teachers' relationships with the parents of their students. Old Town teachers who have worked in schools serving different socio-economic student populations make direct comparisons of parent communities that reveal the political as well as personal implications of cultural and economic background. The teacher I described earlier as passionate about knowing and meeting the needs of non-English speaking students sums up her own perspective on

Old Town parents, who are predominantly Hispanic, as follows. Although her ideological stance may be at the margins of what most of her colleagues would articulate, there is evidence in other interviews that teachers perceive most of the school's parents as possessing a traditional respect and appreciation for the knowledge and judgment of their children's teachers:

> Because we work with a community that's very respectful, they don't know that they can question what you're doing in the classroom. . . . They feel that they are uneducated and 'so what do we know? You all are the ones that know everything.' But we don't always know everything. They have a right as a parent to give their opinion. If you're overloading your kid with homework, or if your backpack has 10 books in it, they have a right to complain. Because the parents at [a wealthy school] would certainly complain.

A young, white teacher agrees with this perception of the Old Town parent community, and describes a very different perception of the parents at a high-wealth school in the district, where she had student taught:

> Over there it felt more like the parents felt like they were smarter than you, or they knew more than you. . . . the parents just seemed to almost be more powerful and they didn't seem as supportive. And they were very questioning like about what you were doing and is it right; and these parents here . . . most of them are glad they're in America, for one thing, and that they're not in their other country. . [They are] more appreciative I think.

Power

A third and final aspect of relating respectfully has to do with how teachers and administrators perceive and use power in their school relationships. Power is a universal concept in investigating relationships, whether one is examining family dynamics from a feminist point of view or international trade from a critical race perspective. In examining the phenomenon of teachers' organizational commitment from a constructivist perspective, I attend primarily to my interpretation of teachers' comments about school experiences they say are meaningful to them.

The term, power, was used by study participants only a very few times, and always in the context of overt conflict between individuals. Interviews include many comments and stories about power in two additional manifestations: control over information sharing and organizational decision-making. Although there are many ways to sort through issues of power, these three are the primary issues that emerge as study participants talk about how people interrelate in their school organization. It is here, too, that teachers talk most about their relationships with those individuals given formal authority at the school site—the principal and assistant principals.

Old Town teachers tell distinct and rather consistent stories about conflict in the school—each related to school administrators. Most recently, teachers experienced the effects of a direct power struggle between the current principal, when she was still new to the job, and a former assistant principal, who evidently was trying to compete for authority. Although the two administrators may not have realized the faculty paid much attention to their conflict or even were cognizant of it, all teachers who refer to the situation were clearly aware of its nature. As a rather diplomatic teacher puts it, "There were two different styles . . . the assistant principal was much different from the principal so there was some conflict. I don't think there was much agreement at that level."

In cases of open conflict, and also in the more subtle tensions due to different priorities among administrators and teachers, there is the assumption that negative consequences can and do fall to those who resist administrator preferences. Although most study participants appear to be ready and able to assert their opinions, teachers also admit to fearing recriminations. In the situation just described, one teacher perceives the two competing administrators as "on our case all the time," each trying to be "rougher [and] gruffer . . . trying to show that she has authority." In the case of the immediately previous Old Town principal, who had imposed multiple changes on the school, a former

teacher says faculty members were concerned their evaluations would suffer if they did not meet the principal's expectations for participation in her new initiatives—even though activities associated with one (a parent and community partnership) largely took place outside of school hours. The teacher goes on to observe:

> Teachers felt that she had her favorites: people who piggybacked [on] anything she said or did. . . . I think it was real hard for teachers to be outspoken. . . . They thought, 'well, if something happens, she might give me a different grade level or put me somewhere I don't want to be.'

Veteran Old Town teachers surface a second manifestation of power—control of information—when they speak longingly of a time when the school enjoyed the formal implementation of site-based management. One teacher describes the principal at that time as "able to get the input of all teachers about all things, just about. . . . We would come to a consensus on different things that we wanted to do or promote in school. Therefore, we felt like we really bought into the whole school and the family idea." Among other things, the principal had established what might be described as a transparent school budgeting environment, which this teacher describes as having an effect well beyond the allocation of resources:

> We had input on budget, we knew where every penny was going. We got to decide together as a faculty really where we wanted those pennies to go. That really enlightened me about what the whole school is about. It's not just about me being in the gym teaching P.E. or outside teaching P.E. It's not about teachers just sitting in their classrooms. I felt like we were able to mold everything into our school, for what we needed for ourselves as well as what's in the best interest of our kids.

In discussing the same era, another long-time teacher asserts teachers have a "right to know" not only about the school budget, but also about other issues that have school-wide implications. My interpretation of her comments is that teachers should be privy to information relevant to school outcomes if they are to be held accountable for

those outcomes, and administrators should take responsibility for the results of decisions that exclude teachers:

> I think we have the right to question what they [administrators] do. Just like some things, even this year, I think 'where is the money in that budget?' You used to, we used to have the right to know, but all of a sudden decisions are made or something will happen. So I think teachers have a right to speak up about something. I don't think you should ever be rude. But they [administrators] should be accountable for their actions, also.

Old Town organizational structures for information sharing appear to be those typically used in elementary schools: written materials in teachers' mailboxes, grade-level team meetings in which teachers respond to questions posed by the principal and team leaders produce meeting minutes, and full faculty meetings. As noted earlier in this chapter, the current Old Town principal also sometimes calls meetings of subsets of teachers to deal with issues she considers to be primarily their responsibility, for example, a planning session on TAKS preparation among classroom teachers in Grades 3 through 6.

The third manifestation of power evident in study participants' interviews, decision-making, is closely intertwined with information sharing. Formal structures for decision making appear to be largely the same as those for information sharing: teaching teams influence administrator decisions through input and voluntary comments in meeting notes to the principal, and faculty meetings potentially create an "open forum" for discussing decisions to be made. In addition, Old Town principals tend to involve teachers in the hiring of new colleagues by including a certain number of teachers in the interview process. In the recent past, the district has included teachers in interviewing principal candidates for their school, after central administration has identified a small set of finalists.

On a personal level, a number of teachers express a strong desire, even expectation, for an "open door" between them and the principal. Being able to express opinions, offer suggestions, and make requests is important to them:

> I think if you have an idea, and you present it, they're really open to it. For example, this year, a teacher and I wanted to present at NABE, you know NABE? (National Association for Bilingual Education). And so we submitted a proposal and got it [accepted]. . . . we went in and asked the principal [and], because she felt like it was important for us and for the school, she took like half of the budget that we had for professional development and gave it to us and we went to New Orleans and we presented.

In terms of decisions that affect the school organization, teachers clearly want to have influence over classroom- and team-related issues. Decisions about individual teaching assignments (e.g., what grade to teach) are particularly important to most teachers. Some teachers don't mind moving from one grade level to another; some even seek reassignments out of a desire to gain broader experience or just a desire for change. A number of teachers, though, explicitly state they would not enjoy or even be effective teaching children younger (or older) than their current grade level. It may be that elementary teachers are not as easily interchangeable as district staffing decisions seem to assume. I will guess, at a minimum, all teachers want a major role in reassignment decisions; one teacher indicates this is even an issue that could cause him to leave a school:

> One thing that would happen that would cause me to reconsider staying here is if they decided, "we're going to put you in third grade" or something like that, which I'm not ready for and I do not want to do at this point. That would be definitely a reason.

One of the veteran teachers who participated in the school's past experience with school-based management indicates teachers also might be interested in helping decide the allocation of teacher resources other than their own position. She says the school's principal at that time "would kind of have an outline of it [the budget], present it to the

whole staff and then sometimes there would be discussion on a certain position for a computer lab person or help. We would discuss that. What their duties were going to be, do we even need that person."

In terms of team-specific decision making, one teacher says grade-level teams have discretion over whether to departmentalize, that is, to split teaching responsibilities by subject area across the team. She indicates the current principal allows teachers to try student grouping arrangements, determine the effects on students, and adjust accordingly. In the past, though, principals have apparently imposed student grouping decisions or even school-wide initiatives with little or no teacher involvement in decision making.

Stories about the principal who had imposed multiple changes on the school illustrate the possible consequences of administrator autocracy. The principal evidently brought three major changes into the school organization simultaneously: a school-wide shift in teacher focus from student academic performance to parent/community involvement and two unique student grouping strategies—looping (teachers stay with their respective classes of students through two or more grade levels) and inclusion (students with special education needs and their teachers are integrated into regular classrooms during most or all of the school day). The consequences for individual teachers and the school as a whole are summarized by a former teacher:

> I'm not sure how many people left that year. I'm going to say . . . maybe eight or nine teachers. . . . I think they weren't happy in that there were things that she was doing that really didn't have a lot to do with teaching. They had to do more with . . . a lot of things for the community. . . . These teachers, it seemed that they weren't being heard, and there wasn't a lot of support for them.

Another former teacher, who happened to like that principal's style and ideas, observed: "I guess [her] biggest fault . . . is that she gets an idea and she's like, 'whooo, let's do it,' without really thinking [it] through."

Chapter 5: Interpretations and Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

INTRODUCTION

Patterns of teacher migration and attrition within urban districts often result in an inequitable share of experienced, committed teachers for high-poverty public schools. At the heart of this dissertation research is the assumption that teacher turnover in these schools is due, largely, to mismanagement of the existing teacher workforce—not insufficient teacher supply or rising demand. Inherent in this assumption is another: because local policymakers and school administrators have direct influence over the work experiences of teachers in their school organizations, they have, perhaps, the greatest opportunity to interrupt teacher turnover patterns.

As a first step toward learning how we might work to reverse these patterns, I proposed to investigate the nature of teacher commitment among teachers who are considered by colleagues to exhibit commitment to working with students of poverty. Specifically, my study set out to better understand the two faces of teacher commitment—professional commitment and organizational commitment—as they play out in a particular high-poverty urban public school in Texas. To achieve this goal, the study was designed to answer two questions: (1) What does "commitment" mean to teachers who work in a school serving students of poverty? and (2) What factors appear to affect teachers' commitment to a high-poverty school?

Collection and analysis of the self-reported perceptions and experiences of 17 teachers who presently or once worked at Old Town Elementary School yielded the body of results discussed in Chapter 4. Although these findings cannot be generalized to apply to all committed teachers in high-poverty schools, they can be considered as sound

descriptions of commitment among individual teachers in a place and time who share certain characteristics with other teachers working in other Texas urban schools—if not many other urban schools in the U.S. On this basis, I view certain of my findings as "well-grounded particularizations" (Patton, 1990) that can support working hypotheses for future inquiry and perhaps even thoughtful implementation in the field.

An overarching finding of my research is, simply, that relationships are perhaps the most important factor influencing teacher commitment—both to the profession and to a specific school. Relationships that are important to teachers vary from individual to individual, yet certain patterns of experience across Old Town study participants are evident. It is important to note that, among the specific commitment-related factors identified in this research, some clearly speak to the general experience of teaching. These factors might be viewed as ones typically shared by committed teachers, regardless of student socio-economic status, school location, or education policy environment. Other factors, however, appear to be directly responsive to the unique challenges that face the high-poverty school organization in which Old Town teachers work and the students they teach. As key factors associated with teacher commitment to students and schools of poverty, these findings deserve closer consideration.

In this final chapter, I briefly summarize results of the present research. I then interpret and consider the implications of three key factors that I believe are grounded in study participants' experiences specific to teaching in a high-poverty school. Given the assumption that the problem of teacher turnover in schools of poverty is a mismanagement of teacher resources, the most important outcome of this inquiry and subsequent work on teacher commitment will be the improved management of local teacher workforces, which then yields more stable, experienced teaching faculties in high-poverty schools.

Effective management of employees, including teachers in schools, is not purely an administrative task. It also involves the setting of organizational policy, ongoing study of employee behavior, and adaptation to results. Thus, in highlighting three factors that appear to be particularly critical to teacher commitment to students and schools of poverty, I will consider the implications of each for further work on a number of fronts. That is, as umbrella issues, they raise possibilities for (a) action by school administrators, (b) policy change by education decision-makers, and/or (c) new inquiry by researchers.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Certain findings from this study of teachers who work(ed) at Old Town Elementary School are consistent with results from other recent studies of teacher commitment to the work of teaching. To some extent, the career is a “calling” for many teachers. It is a choice based on personal ideology (Reyes, 1990; Somech & Bogler, 2002; Weick & McDaniel, 1989). Indeed, intrinsic rewards were reported by my study participants far more often than any extrinsic or material benefits.

Factors influencing Old Town teachers' professional commitment center on (a) their personal identification with students, (b) their dedication to making a difference for students and parents, and (c) their willingness to devote personal time and energy outside their classrooms to take action on those personal values and priorities. Among the 17 teachers, relationships with students and parents seem to be at the center of their professional commitment to teaching children of poverty.

Although study respondents commonly use the metaphors of "family" and "community" when asked to describe Old Town Elementary, many teachers seem to consider the core members of the family to be teaching colleagues. By and large, teachers' spontaneous responses to "Why do you stay at this particular school?" were "Because of the other teachers who work here." This more narrow definition of the

organization may have come about due to the frequent turnover of administrators in recent years (four principals in 10 years, and even more frequent changes in assistant principals). Teachers clearly depend on each other for most needs—and a couple veteran faculty members even suggest that the school has shown it can function without a stable administration.

Factors influencing the teachers' organizational commitment are grounded in the extent to which they (a) enjoy mutual support in managing the work of teaching, and (b) experience respectful interactions in the workplace. Among study participants, relationships with fellow teachers and other instructional staff seem to be central to their willingness to stay on the faculty of a specific high-poverty school. Relationships with school administrators, on the other hand, appear to play a strong role in teachers' decisions to leave their current school or transfer to another chosen school.

ISSUES CRITICAL TO TEACHER COMMITMENT IN A HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOL

Connecting with Students

Analysis of the driving force behind teachers' commitment to the profession, which I refer to as a desire to make a difference, yielded two different aspects of this "calling." The first—teachers' personal *identification with students*—is, by definition, directly linked to the characteristics of Old Town students and the meaning teachers ascribe to those characteristics. Study participants identify with students on the basis of similar (a) racial, ethnic, language, or cultural backgrounds; (b) economic circumstances; (c) experiences with social problems that often accompany poverty, such as drug/alcohol abuse and criminal behavior; and (d) experiences with challenges to their own school success as children or youth, such as reading difficulties and learning disabilities.

The ability to personally identify with the backgrounds and experiences of students seems to create a unique connection for committed Old Town teachers with their students. Assuming this relationship benefits, or at least does no harm to, student learning, teacher identification with students seems to be a commitment factor to which we should pay attention.

School administrators might simply explore with faculty the idea of teacher identification with students as an avenue for creating potentially important connections between teachers and their students. What do teachers have in common with their students and students' families? Is there a basis for personal identification? What are the effects of existing teacher/student identification in the school? How might the faculty build on positive effects, to create more vital and productive connections with students? Do some students have characteristics that few or no teachers can identify with? What are the effects on teaching and learning? What strategies can counter any negative effects?

Local policymakers, who have considerable influence over school access to the local teacher pool, might seek ways to maximize the potential for high-poverty schools to benefit from known advantages of teacher/student identification. The district can first determine what characteristics for teachers-to-be-hired (other than those traditionally considered, e.g., education, certification, previous teaching experience) are important to principals and teachers presently staffing high-poverty schools. To whatever extent is legally possible, the personnel office can supplement employment applications and/or interviews with questions soliciting other aspects of teacher applicants' backgrounds. District hiring goals and procedures can give high-poverty schools priority over other schools in interviewing and offering employment to the most "desirable" teacher candidates (that is, candidates that seem likely to fit the schools' expressed needs).

Finally, this issue raises multiple questions for researchers to pursue. It has long been recognized that children need adults they can identify with as role models, mentors, and teachers. For well over a decade, a number of state legislatures as well as researchers have been concerned about the high proportion of white, middle-class females in the current teacher labor force and in the teacher pipeline. Various efforts to recruit college students of color into teacher education and ensure they enter the profession have been initiated and funded. The idea that teacher identification with students may be a critical factor for teachers, as well, is somewhat different. Questions that arise include:

- What do teachers gain from identifying with students?
- What do teachers "lose" through the absence of such a connection?
- Can teachers who don't share some aspect of their students' economic or cultural backgrounds develop another avenue for identification?
- If meaningful "identification" with others is only possible through shared background or experience, can another aspect of professional commitment provide an equally beneficial connection between teachers and students of poverty? For example, is a commitment to social justice (an aspect of what was called effecting social change in Chapter 4) a potent enough factor to influence a teacher's long-term commitment to teach students of poverty?

A parallel set of questions focusing on teachers' identification with their students' parents offers intriguing research potential. Although this dissertation research does not include the collection of data from teachers who presently work in middle-class or wealthy schools, data do include comments from a few teachers who have worked at schools serving high-SES communities as well as schools like Old Town. These teachers' comparisons of parent communities at the two economic extremes (included in the discussion of power in Chapter 4) suggest teachers may experience very different parent-

teacher relationships at each. What do these relationships "look like?" How do they affect the teaching and learning environment? How do they affect teacher commitment? Can teachers who don't share some aspect of the parent community's economic or cultural background develop another avenue for identification?

Going Above and Beyond the Call of Duty

Another factor that seems to distinguish the professional commitment of teachers who choose and/or stay in high-poverty schools, which I call *commitment in action*, is the regular extension of personal time and effort beyond the boundaries of the school day, the school week, and the school itself. Regardless of their years of professional experience, teachers in my study appear to devote many hours—both paid and unpaid—to activities that are designed to provide additional support to their students and, in some cases, the parent community. These supports, and more, are critical if Old Town students are to graduate from high school and enter adult life with the academic and social knowledge and skills on par with children from more advantaged family backgrounds.

Old Town teachers see, on a daily basis, evidence that economic and social advantages are not distributed equally or equitably among all students. As was discussed in Chapter 4, teachers who have ideological goals associated with educational and/or social change know these advantages matter. They know that it takes more resources (time, skill, and determination as well as material goods) to ensure that students from high-poverty backgrounds enjoy those advantages. So, they take action by directing their personal resources of time, skill, and energy toward such goals as inspiring and empowering students to overcome adversity, encouraging higher education toward professional careers, enriching the life experiences of students and/or their parents, and even educating parents as well as their children.

This is not to ignore the efforts expended by teachers who work in other schools. A novice teacher may spend 50, 60, or more hours a week during her/his first few years in the profession; many new teachers do, in order to continue learning their craft while taking full responsibility for a classroom of students. This also is, in no way, a dismissal of the additional time and effort many teachers must expend at certain times of the year or even during an entire school year when they encounter certain changes in policy, introductions of new practice, or other challenges. However, the particular goals and many of the activities Old Town teachers take on are clearly "above and beyond the call of duty" at most schools other than those serving high-poverty student populations. Simply put, teachers who make these and other contributions to such schools have a harder job than the average teacher.

Given this last observation, principals of high-poverty schools might consider how they can use their existing discretion over school time, student grouping, budget, and other organizational resources to facilitate and reward teachers who take significant and/or ongoing action on their commitments to students. Although the principal of Old Town and her colleagues at similar campuses in Texas school districts are under increasing pressure to improve student performance and achieve other goals set for them by government, they continue to have considerable authority at the school site as well.

Furthermore, administrators might direct whatever influence they possess beyond the school walls to encourage the district to view the teachers on their campuses as—again—teachers who have a more demanding job compared to teachers in middle class and wealthy schools. In many professional occupations, employees who are required or even asked to work harder, longer, and smarter have different and/or higher levels of compensation. A case could be made that this is exactly the expectation placed on educators who demonstrate their commitment in ways described by Old Town teachers.

As for local policymakers, school board members and district superintendents could consider the permanent provision of special compensation for teachers who make important, “above and beyond the call of duty” contributions to students and parents in high-poverty schools. A case could be made for legislators and other state-level policymakers to seriously consider this strategy, as well, as a way to attract and retain experienced, committed teachers in challenging schools.

This idea that teachers committed to work in high-poverty schools are performing a fundamentally different and more demanding job poses some interesting possibilities for research associated with a concept called Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB). OCB emerged from the field of organizational psychology as a class of discretionary behaviors such as “civic virtue, altruism, conscientiousness, sportsmanship, or courtesy” that are above and beyond the execution of basic duties expected of employees (Van Dick, 2001, p. 268). OCB behaviors are job-related behaviors that have been found to contribute to the functioning of organizations, including schools. Recently, OCB behaviors also have been found to be correlated with teacher commitment (Somech & Bogler, 2002).

Interestingly, the perspectives shared by Old Town teachers, present and past, are consistent with the findings reported by Somech and Bogler (2002) that: (a) teachers with high levels of professional commitment report more involvement in OCBs than do teachers with lower levels, and (b) these behaviors are directed toward students rather than toward their teaching teams or the school organization. Throughout the comments and stories of participants in this dissertation research, little is said about a connection between teachers' perceptions of their profession and Old Town Elementary School itself. The motivations, perceived rewards, and desire to “make a difference” articulated by

teachers do, instead, center on students and, in some cases, their students' parents. Questions that deserve investigation include:

- How might Organizational Citizenship Behaviors contribute to the functioning of a high-poverty school?
- How does teacher exercise of OCBs affect other teachers in the school? Does it also have impacts on student learning?
- What monetary value might a school district reasonably place on OCBs exercised by teachers in high-poverty schools?

Forging a Link between Professional and Organizational Commitment

One factor associated with the commitment of teachers to specific high-poverty school organizations (as compared to the teaching profession in general) deserves final consideration as a potentially rich opportunity for administrative action, policy change, and educational research. When Old Town teachers talk about aspects of what I have called *relating respectfully*, they refer most often to the satisfaction (or lack thereof) of their interactions with school administrators. Although the ideas embedded in respectful relationships will resonate with teachers in all kinds of schools, this issue may be the most provocative of all in schools serving high-poverty students and families.

Through the present study, we now understand the commitment of teachers to be, at least in part, dependent on the quality of their multiple and diverse relationships with people in the school in which they work and its parent community. Other research on teachers and teaching lend support to the ideas that teachers rely on collegial, collaborative relationships with fellow teachers and staff. They also appreciate a productive relationship with school administrators who are supportive of their work and their personal circumstances. Equally important, they thrive on the success of their students, both those presently in their classrooms and former students who continue to

come back for a visit (Ascher, 1991; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson & Birkeland, 2002; NCES, 1997; Reyes et al., 1999; Scott et al., 2001).

Some of the conditions affecting relationships in high-poverty schools are defined by the education-related needs of students served by the school. Other conditions are defined by the characteristics of students' families. The Old Town parent community clearly offers the school organization a different mix of resources than that offered by the parent community of a more advantaged school, in terms of financial support, educational opportunities outside of school, and volunteer time. Finally, the conditions for teaching are defined by the education policy environment surrounding the school. Old Town and similar schools are directly and indirectly affected by changes at the district, community, and state levels. For example, the pressures experienced by public school districts operating under high-stakes accountability systems are directly passed on to individual schools, and they clearly play out very differently in high-poverty schools compared to other schools.

In brief, the personal, social, and political context within which teachers in high-poverty schools build or lose commitment to their profession, and maintain or release commitment to their school organization, is complex and increasingly challenging. Teachers are keenly aware of this. As a result, many of those who participated in my study clearly want, at minimum, open communication with school administrators about organizational matters affecting their professional work (e.g., school resources for professional development, proposed changes in student grouping). Some teachers place greatest importance on the opportunity to participate in technical decisions about curriculum and instruction, the traditional purview of classroom teachers. Although substantial technical decisions are made already by teachers on a daily basis—in their classrooms, in team meetings, and on ad hoc committees—recognition of these activities

for what they are might enhance teachers' sense of commitment to the school organization.

Other teachers value the opportunity to participate in decision-making on school-wide issues, which traditionally are managerial issues (Ascher, 1991; Ingersoll, 2001; NCES, 1997; Reyes et al., 1999; Somech & Bogler, 2002). Veteran teachers' descriptions of their past experiences with school-based management at Old Town, as discussed in Chapter 4, are remarkably well-aligned with the findings of other research on how direct participation in managerial decisions contributes to both professional and organizational forms of teacher commitment:

> Through involvement in managerial issues, teachers see their role not only as instructors within their own classes but also as members of the whole organization. This point of view strengthens their identification with their professional goals as well as with their organizational goals (Somech & Bogler, 2002, p. 570).

A close companion to teachers' needs for access to information and decision making, which clearly is provided (or not) by the school administrator, is their needs for appreciation from that administrator. Old Town teachers seem to want the clearest possible communication of the principal's respect and recognition of their skills and contributions. In such a small group of study participants, all of whom were valued by the colleagues who recommended them for participation, there were many who were convinced that the present or a former school administrator did not share that appreciation. Although I did not systematically analyze data from the study to identify differences between Old Town teachers who remain at the school and those who transferred to other high-poverty schools, there is a strong sense from teachers' stories that colleagues motivate them to remain committed to the school, while principals prompt them to leave. A disrespectful and/or disempowering relationship with an administrator is

explicitly named by a number of teachers as reason why they would leave (or actually had left) a school.

The two interdependent factors discussed here directly echo the needs and/or desires identified in other research: (a) participation in school decision making (Ascher, 1991; Ingersoll, 2001; NCES, 1997; Reyes et al., 1999), and (b) highly supportive relationships with their school principals (Ascher, 1991; NCES, 1997).

It seems that principals of high-poverty schools should pay close attention to the needs and preferences of the teachers on their faculties relative to participating in formal school decision making about issues important to them. Both immediate and long-term benefits might accrue from including teachers in more information sharing and soliciting more input. Although state policy in Texas requires some form of teacher participation in school decisions, and local policy can further encourage and facilitate it across the district, such action is largely at the discretion of the individual school administrator. A veteran teacher at Old Town suggests that administrator exercise of more inclusive strategies might avoid emergence of unexpected conflicts which, presently, are bubbling under the surface at the school:

> There've been so many times this year when I'm thinking 'well why don't we get to decide? Why don't we get to talk about it?' Because I feel like there needs to be more of that going on. . . . I think there's a lot of undercurrents, particularly this year, of things that are going that maybe people dislike, yet there's nobody that'll really bring it to a head or nobody that will really go in and discuss it with the administration.

In terms of research opportunities, it seems the time is ripe to explore the link between the professional commitment of teachers to making a difference for high-poverty students and their commitment to the school organization itself. An ideal situation for students and schools of poverty would be congruence between the two at the school site. As noted earlier in this report, there exist no inherent conflicts between a professional's

commitment to the profession and to her/his particular organization. Weick and McDaniel (1989) assert that a professional organization—such as a public school— will, by definition, have compatible goals with that of its employees. After considering the results of the present study of teacher commitment, it seems that school administrators and policymakers might do well to rethink traditional approaches to solving the problem of teacher turnover in high-poverty schools. Instead of launching an effort to 'get it right,' in some determinant sense, by identifying and imposing a particular strategy, organizational theorists would recommend they focus their attention toward using an array of strategies to encourage and promote relationships, or connectivity, among and between teachers and other people central to the functioning of school organizations. Further research might help administrators and local policymakers in this effort by learning more about successful approaches toward working openly and respectfully with teachers to build connections and relationships, foster informal dialogue, and create formal, inclusive interaction processes (Ashmos, Huonker, & McDaniel, 1998; McDaniel & Driebe, 2001). In the process, students and schools of poverty might well see a welcome increase in the willingness of experienced, committed teachers to remain a part of their education enterprise.

Appendix

SITE SELECTION CRITERIA (DATA DELETED)

Data/info	School name		School name		School name		School name		School name		School name		ISD avg
School contact	*Principal name, address, and phone*												
Size & grades	*# of students; PK-6*												
Student information													
SES, language proficiency, mobility, and ethnicity (%)													
Econ. disadv.													
Limited Eng													
Mobility													
Afr. Am.													
Asian													
Hispanic													
Native Am.													
White													
Performance data – Passing All TAAS Tests Taken (%)													
Time period	***2002***	***Change since '98***	***2002***	***Since '98***	***2002***	***Since '98***	***2002***	***Since '98***	***2002***	***Since '98***	***2002***	***Since '98***	***2002***
All students													
Afr. Am.													
Hispanic													
White													
Econ. Disadv.													
Special notes													
Teachers													
Turnover, 2000-01 (%)													
Resign													
Retire													
Transfer													
Total turnover													
Experience (%)													
0-5 years													
6-10 years													
11-15													
>15 years													
Ethnicity (%)													
Afr. Am.													
Asian Am.													
Hispanic													
Native Am.													
White													

[a]A series of letters was assigned to each teacher to ensure confidentiality and to serve as the briefest possible file name for data management purposes. [b]As of end of school year 2003-04. [c]Teachers were identified for participation in this study based largely on recommendation from a teacher previously interviewed. [d]Because years in a Montessori school were not teaching, time not included in total years experience. The same is true for student teaching experience. [e]Includes initial identification by Old Town principal. [f]District grant-funded position.

FIRST ROUND INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interviewee: _____ Date/time _____

Introduction: I'm interested in the story of how you came to teach at a high-poverty school and why you are choosing to stay here at Old Town Elementary School / why you chose to leave Old Town Elementary School.

1. Please tell me how you became a teacher.
   Points to probe:
   - Time – when entered teaching
   - Educational preparation – traditional teacher education, alternative certification program, or other; philosophy etc.
   - Impetus for entering the profession – personal experience, family connection, etc.

2. Why do you continue to teach?
   Points to probe:

Examples of fulfillment
Examples of challenge

3. How has teaching changed over time for you?
   Points to probe:
   - How motivation has changed
   - How satisfaction has changed
   - How expectations have changed
   - How the work has changed

4. How did you come to teach at Old Town Elementary School?
   Points to probe:
   - Personal history – how long ago, first teaching assignment vs teacher transfer, need or choice, etc.

5. What keeps you here [or] what prompted you to leave?
   Points to probe:
   - Individual factors – personal satisfaction, sense of efficacy, philosophical or political commitment, etc.
   - School factors – colleagues, school structures, professional growth, etc.
   - External factors – job compensation, convenient school location, etc.

6. What do you see yourself doing in five years? Ten years?
   Points to probe:
   - Same teaching position vs. different grade, specialization, etc.
   - Same school vs. transfer
   - Still teaching vs. other education-related work
   - Still education work vs. leave the profession

FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interviewee: _____ Date/time _____

1. How would you describe Old Town Elementary School to a teacher who has never been here or heard about it? What's most important here? Do other teachers share your view? What understandings do you think teachers DO share?

2. From interviews last year, I saw that relationships appear to be an important part of why teachers teach and why they stay in schools that educate many children from poverty backgrounds.

    a. Please think about the people you have worked with here at Old Town Elementary School who are important to you, personally or professionally (think about teaching staff, non-teaching staff, principals, parents, students). Can you briefly describe your relationship with one or more of those people?
        What are the most important things that come to mind when you think of them?
        What could or can you depend on them for?
        How do your relationships with these people affect your work as a teacher?

    b. Please think about a change that was introduced into the school in the last five years (think about instructional strategies, curricula, student grouping plans, scheduling, special programs). Can you briefly describe what happened with your relationships with the people you just talked about, or others important to you here, when the change was introduced and then implemented?
        Did the relationships affect the change?
        Did the change affect the relationships?
        Who was taking leadership on the change during that time?

3. On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you with your teaching life at Old Town Elementary School? Is that higher or lower than you think it was last year? How much? Why?

4. Do you plan to stay here next year? In what grade or area will you teach? Why? If not, where will you go? What will you do?

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Please tell me how you first entered the field of education. If you entered as a teacher, how did you come to move into school administration? How did you come to teach at this school?

2. How would you describe Old Town Elementary School to a principal who has never been here or heard about it? What's most important here? Do you think teachers and staff share your view?

3. What keeps you here?
   Points to probe:
   - Individual factors – personal satisfaction, sense of efficacy, philosophical or political commitment, etc.
   - School factors – colleagues, school structures, professional growth, etc.
   - External factors – job compensation, convenient school location, etc.

4. From my interviews last year, I saw that relationships appear to be an important part of why teachers teach and why they stay in challenging schools (e.g., those that educate many children from poverty backgrounds). Please think about the teachers who have worked here during your tenure.

   a. Some of these teachers have taught here for over 5 years, which is often a point of career decision making for educators. How would you describe the relationships these teachers appear to have with others in the school community, personally or professionally (think about teaching staff, non-teaching staff, principals, parents, even students)?

   b. As is the case for most schools, this school also has a number of relatively new teachers (5 years or less). How would you describe the relationships these teachers appear to have with others in the school community, personally or professionally (think about teaching staff, non-teaching staff, principals, parents, even students)?

5. Please think about a challenge the school has encountered in the last few years. Can you briefly describe what happened with relationships among teachers when they encountered the challenge and when the school responded to that challenge?
   Did the relationships affect the change?
   Did the change affect the relationships?

6. Now think about the teachers whom you have come to depend on most. What are most important things that come to mind when you think of them? What do you depend on them for? How do you think they contribute to the success of the school?

INITIAL OPEN CODING OF FIRST ROUND INTERVIEWS

Examples of "perceptions of others" (paraphrased and/or elaborated from margin notes on transcripts) include:

- Parents of bilingual students at need education themselves.
- Wealthy schools empower parents.
- Mutual support between bilingual and non-bilingual teachers is important.
- Teachers need to share a philosophy regarding early reading in PreK[1] and K[2].
- At-risk kids need good teachers to hang in with them.
- School resources are focused on upper grades because of the TAKS[3] and SSI[4].
- Parents need to network about school expectations.
- New [i.e., young] Hispanic teachers have a different culture than immigrant students and older Hispanic teachers.
- Teacher interactions with parents on their home ground are important.
- High income schools don't value inexperienced teachers.
- Students give teachers unconditional love.
- Poverty worsens students' disabilities.
- Wealthy schools provide teaching resources for teachers; low income schools require teachers to make do.
- Teachers must provide social work-type assistance to parents.
- Teachers leave because of problems with administrators as well as "normal reasons" like moving, graduate school, etc.
- Changes made by new principals often create stress for teachers.

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[1] Pre-kindergarten.
[2] Kindergarten.
[3] Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills.
[4] Student Success Initiative.

Examples of "perceptions of self" (paraphrased and/or elaborated) include:

- Special education teacher preparation teaches advocacy.
- Taking on paperwork responsibilities for inexperienced colleagues is stressful.
- Learning behavior management ideas from experienced teachers is helpful.
- Teachers have different expectations of each others' roles.
- Expectations for students increase as a teacher gains teaching experience.
- Non-teaching staff and district staff are helpful with administrative tasks.
- Lack of appreciation from the principal can cause a teacher to leave.
- Personal experience with poverty allows identification with low SES students.
- Background as a non-English speaking student whose needs were not understood allows identification with students who do not speak English.
- Sharing a culture allows a teacher to understand students' parents.
- TAKS testing has caused upper grade teachers to work less with lower grades.
- Seeing students growth at the end of the year encourages a teacher come back.
- IPGs[5] are hard to implement when teachers don't have the material resources.
- Receiving leadership opportunities from the principal is enjoyable.
- Having an alcoholic family member allows identification with students whose families have similar problems.
- Teachers have had to let go of "fun" activities due to a shortage of time.
- Power struggles between administrators create problems for teachers.
- Teachers know and rely on other teachers who are good with discipline.
- Working in a high SES school teaches a teacher how to challenge students.
- Appreciation from past students and parents is very rewarding.

[5] Instructional Planning Guides: the district's new grade-specific, TEKS-based sets of lesson plans for elementary schools.

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